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Dropped Threads: Articulating a History of Textile Instability through 20th Century Sculpture

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of the University of
Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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Design & Social Sciences

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Abstract

Despite the 'post-media condition' of contemporary practice, some materials continue to be more equal than others. Cloth has a problematic history in Western art, frequently dismissed for its perceived inability to convey meaning beyond its own materiality, or a narrow idea of identity. The following thesis reconsiders this perspective and argues that it arose from the concurrence of heterogeneous post-war groups such as Post-Minimalism, and Fiber and Tapestry Movements, and the plethora of textile-based work they created. I review the accompanying critical responses to demonstrate how they sought to differentiate the use of fabric within these movements through the entrenchment of boundaries between valorised 'art' and denigrated 'craft'. The thesis analyses how these categories were further complicated by mismatched lexicons of textile terminology. While fibre movements referred overtly and directly to fabric, the coinciding art theory primarily described its functions and affectations. We talk about the 'softness' of Oldenburg's sculptures, not the cloth that makes them.

This research argues that while there has been increasing scholarship surrounding these suppressed 'craft' textile practices, there is little exploration of the parallel and distinct material history of fabric within Western canonical Fine Art. The project addresses this asymmetry by focusing on the unspoken instances of cloth in mainstream twentieth century sculptural work and identifying the particular ways that artists have used this material. Artists have long employed the quotidian and shifting nature of textiles to convey ideas of instability, an impulse that can be traced back to Marcel Duchamp's 1913 work *3 Standard Stoppages*.

In order to critically interrogate the existing histories of textiles in twentieth century sculptural practices, the historical narratives presented in a number of exhibitions and catalogues are investigated. These accounts are considered in relation to three case studies that examine instances of structural, spatial and temporal instability in which cloth disrupts and untethers notions of fixed forms and static spaces. Investigating these narratives highlights historical cloth omissions, allowing for an understanding of how amnesiac textile gaps affect practitioners today.

My own cloth-based sculptural practice gives me a material authority and alternative perspective with which to question these received art historical narratives, and that in turn allows me to re-contextualise my decision to consistently work with this medium. My research-led practice centres on fabric objects that reference architectural forms; pieces that explore and exploit the unstable nature of cloth through their unfixed nature, and that I constantly reposition, resisting a final placement. By documenting these movements through photography and video, different temporalities are suggested, and a series of works that fluctuate between stasis and fluidity, order and chaos, are created. Accompanying these works are passages in the dissertation that reflectively address the process of making and contending with the legacy of cloth.

This project argues that fabric has been under-recognised but widely used in sculptural practices for over a century. Through explicitly articulating this narrative, a richer historical context for works that use fabric can be ascertained, and the insufficient complement of textile language in contemporary artistic discourse can be redressed.

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I will forever be thankful for the modern technology that enables my most incredible friend Daccia to be always within reach. And I would like to thank Daccia for being a consistent miracle in my life for over 20 years and for saying yes every time I typed "can I send you something to read?".

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Lastly, I wish to sincerely thank my principal supervisor, Professor David Campbell. I would often start our supervisory meetings overwhelmed by self-doubt only to leave an hour later feeling resolutely empowered to continue pushing and developing this project. I thank him for his guidance in honing and refining the arguments presented in the following thesis, for being as interested in my studio practice as he was in my writing and helping me to keep those two elements in balance throughout this process, and finally, for never once balking when I said the word 'textile'. A rare quality indeed.

Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 39349 words

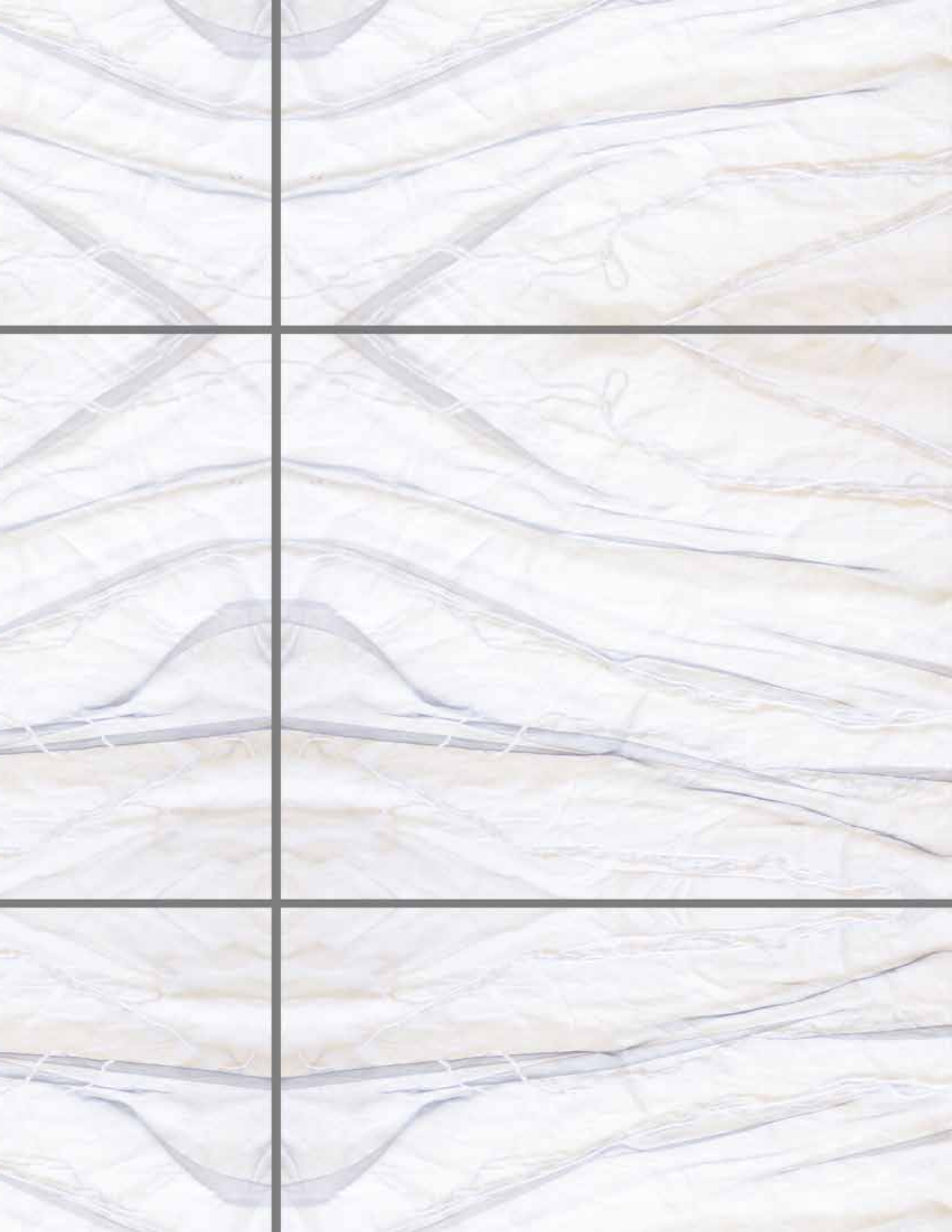
Name: Katie McGown

Signature:

Date:

The background of the slide is a topographic map with contour lines and a grid overlay. The map is divided into four quadrants by a vertical line and a horizontal line. The word "Introduction" is centered in the middle of the grid.

Introduction



Introduction

Part 1: Fabric in a Post-Medium Moment

It feels regressive to devote a sustained period of investigation to a specific material.

I write this first iteration of a chapter in a document I confidently title ‘Introduction’, just after the opening of the 56th Venice Biennale. The Director Okwui Enwezor, mandated to distil the contemporary in this most renowned and purportedly central event, has bestowed upon it an equally assured, if knowing, title: *All the World’s Future*. Including more nations than any other edition, there is a clear emphasis on ecological and geopolitical forces; Christoph Buchel’s *Mosque* has just been closed.¹ In the newly-constructed central ARENA, Isaac Julien’s daily reading of *Das Kapital* is about to begin again this morning.² And this is not a lone directorial impulse, Documenta 14, due to open in April 2017, will occur simultaneously over two sites for the first time, opening in both Kassel and Athens. The Euro-political context of the festival so pertinent, that its single historical location no longer felt adequate.

These are blunt measures, but they indicate over-arching conversations, our momentary thrust. I finish writing these paragraphs and crack open Harold Rosenberg’s *The Anxious Object* only to find the same conceit; the author using the 6th São Paulo Bienal to try to encapsulate the unrest of international art and abstraction fifty years ago. And even fifty years ago, when the work in the discussed exhibition was almost exclusively painting, when the nature and future of painting was the subject of frequent and ardent debate, Rosenberg seeks the wider context. Dialogues and discussions that investigate systems and relations, not the characteristics and implications of one particular material (1965:p.14).

So why do I insist on talking about cloth instead of these wider systemic structures?

Away from this preeminent artistic festival, on the edges of my town, at the edges of London, my quiet rural space at the intersection of overlapping peripheries, I click through the images from Venice. Scanning the photo galleries and playing the videos softly in the early hours of dawn, I start to find them. The piles of fabric, the pinned garments on clothes lines, the soft near-structures, part-built or part-collapsed. I was not surprised to see this slumping sculptural morphology in and around the pavilions; the dank burlap of Ibrahim Mahama’s work *Out of Bounds* clad-
ding the exterior of the Arsenale, the stretched, monumental, hyperchromatic sheets of Katharina

1 Acting as the Icelandic Pavilion and in response to the lack of Islamic places of worship in the historic centre of Venice, *Mosque* turned a deconsecrated church into a space for services and prayers. It received a substantial amount of press and was closed by Venetian authorities on May 22nd for various violations including over-crowding and security concerns (Vartanian, 2015).

2 Isaac Julien’s *Das Kapital Oratorio* staged in the ARENA. Conceived by Okwui Enwezor with Isaac Julien and Mark Nash. Performed three times daily from May 9 – Nov 22, 2015.

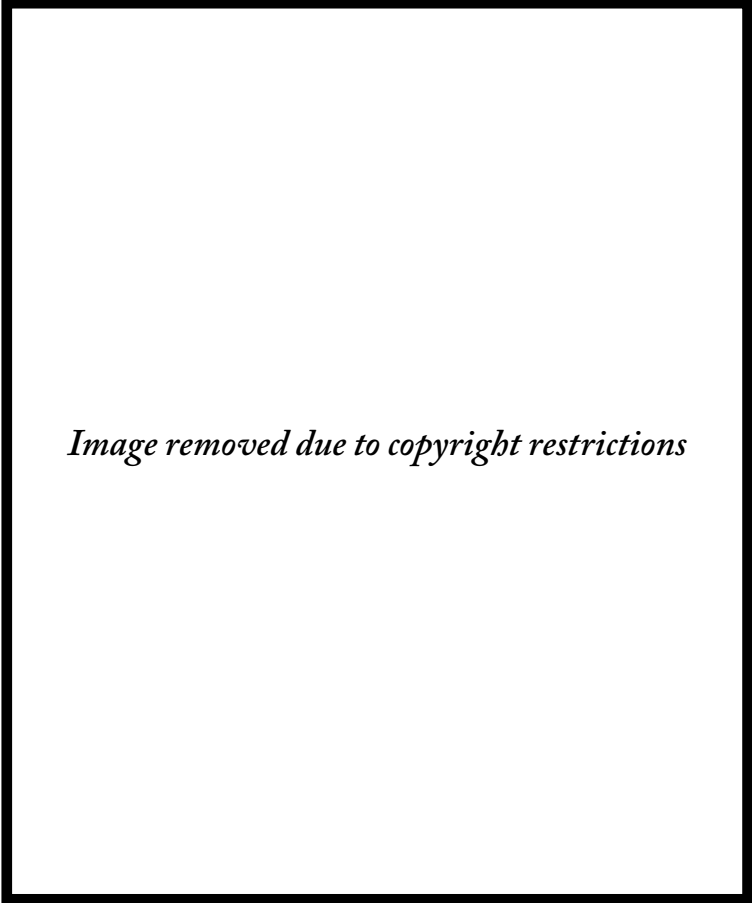


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*Figure 1: El Anatsui, *Fresh and fading memories*, 2007. Palazzo Fortuny, Venice Biennale.*

Grosse's *Untitled Trumpet*, or the blunt, limp pile of clothing in Patricia Cronin's *Shrine for Girls*. I've started to expect cloth to appear in exactly these moments: when there is uncertainty and fluidity, both in the physical world, and within our social structures.

El Anatsui has been awarded Venice's Golden Lion in recognition of his lauded career constructing undulating and fragmentary panels made up of thousands of flattened metal discs pierced and wired together. These pieces come together to form glittering sheets that are pulled across gallery walls, or cascade down building facades. As these bits of metal are the caps of liquor bottles imported to Nigeria from the Europe and America, there are implicit discourses of colonialism and economics seeping through these golden, shimmery constructions. His work is a clear embodiment of Enwezor's curatorial direction; a logical recipient of this prestigious award.

Anatsui's work also tells us two things about cloth: One, cloth is not defined by its material composition. There is no requirement for it to be made of organic or synthetic materials, to be woven, knit, felted or poured into thin latex. This indicates a behavioural rather than an essentialist understanding of textiles.³ Flattened metal disks sutured together, or fibres of cotton can become cloth.

And secondly, cloth is not a benign material within the context of contemporary art. Although the name of one of his most enduring series is *Cloth of Man*, although his work is spoken of as textiles, Anatsui is no longer comfortable identifying his practice in this manner. In her 2012 monograph of Anatsui, Susan M. Vogel establishes a clear break in the artist's approach, beginning in 2008 when "the cloth phase was over" (p.119). He says:

I made a mistake when I started naming [the metal hangings] after cloths. Because people seized upon that – and I'm sure that a lot of very lazy critics and curators did the same – so that all they do is build a point up to kente⁴ cloth, and that ends everything. But the idea behind the works is that they are to be looked at as sculpture pieces, in which case you have to look at all the ramifications that go into a work of sculpture – the process, the materials.(p.120)

One can only imagine the infinite tedious conversations that Anatsui has had to endure in order for his language to become so rigid, and his disavowal so complete. Feeling perhaps as though it pigeonholes the work in a category of 'otherness' - feminine, African, craft - that would not only reduce its ability to operate within a contemporary art context, and therefore its market value, but also to negate its ability to communicate criticality beyond the decorative. These concrete categories were questioned by Jessica Hemmings in her review of Vogel's book, prompting her to ask "why textile and art (...) cannot coexist?" (2013:p.86)

3 A further example of this behavioural understanding can be seen in the working definition of lace as "a lot of holes surrounded by thread" (Earnshaw, 2000:p.7)

4 *Kente* cloth is an indigenous fabric of Ghana (Anatsui's birth country, although he has resided in Nigeria for his adult life), and characterized by its bright, primary colours and its construction from long strips of woven bands that are then attached together to form broad cloth.

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Figure 2: El Anatsui TSLATSLA - searching for connection, 2013. London, Royal Academy.

Anatsui became a major name in the international art world after his first project in Venice when he draped the Palazzo Fortuny in the golden and disintegrating folds of *Fresh and Fading Memories* in 2007 (Figure 1). Notably, this shift in global recognition coincides with the end of the “cloth phase”. While Anatsui and his production studio are constantly finding new ways of forming and assembling the bottle caps, the fundamental methods and materials of his practice have remained consistent in the years since 2008. The large-scale installation at the Royal Academy in London in 2012, *TSAITSAI – looking for connection* (Figure 2), demonstrates a development of scale and ambition, but the materials are still functioning in the same manner; the metal has still been turned into cloth.

Anatsui’s discomfort is our discomfort. His discomfort is my discomfort. As an artist who has predominantly used textiles in my own sculptural practice for the past fifteen years, I have also had hundreds of frustrating conversations about my choice of materials. Differences in our identities and statures naturally make these interactions distinct, but when Anatsui wearily notes that the association with *kente* cloth “ends everything”, my own gut responds with a queasy punch of recognition. Just as Anatsui may find a wearying persistence in his innovative practice being linked to foggy notions of traditional African techniques, a white, Western woman using cloth as a primary material, recalls twee handiwork or the cosy domestic. Both positions linked in their assumed absence of content and vacuum of criticality.

The reduction of Anatsui’s work, or my work, to these narrow, often unrelated practices, succeeds in both occluding the actual content of the pieces, and perpetuating an idea that fabric cannot contain or convey meaning beyond itself. To speak directly of cloth, of fabric, of textiles suggests craft, and the boundaries of art practice. But to not speak of cloth implies that this most ancient and adaptable of human inventions, that surrounds us at every moment of our personal and industrial lives, does not communicate its own distinct messages. The silence around cloth denies its consistent usage for the past hundred years in the art world. And this is a falsehood that perpetuates reductive assumptions short-circuiting an understanding of cloth.

Part 2: The First Textile Sculpture

Beside my desk is pinned the note from a lecture I gave to students at one of London’s art colleges. A small, insistent thesis (Figure 4):

Aim of the talk: to demonstrate that textiles have been used in sculptural practices from the beginning of the 20th C onwards. By men and women. That their use is neither exceptional nor unexpected. That the particular materiality of cloth is often investigated and exploited. That this use (for a number of reasons) is not named or identified, resulting in an ongoing amnesiac loop, the art world constantly holding cloth at an anxious

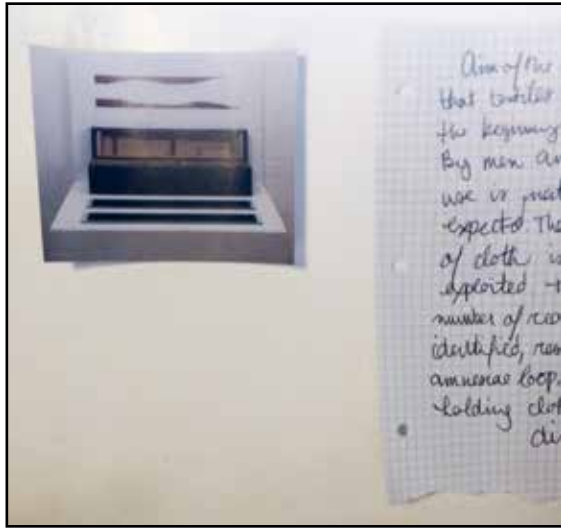


Figure 3 (Left): 3 Standard Stoppages, my desk.

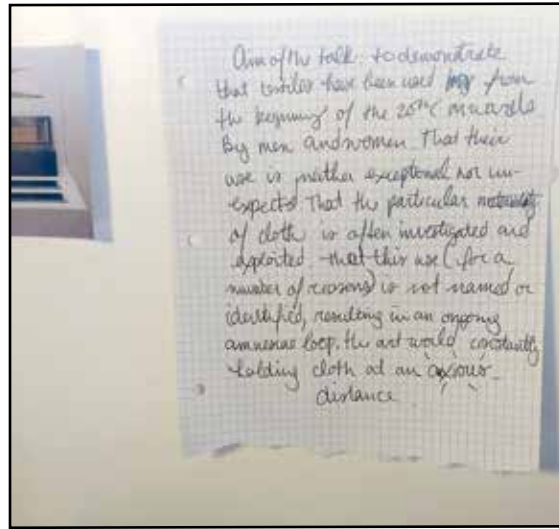


Figure 4 (Right): guiding thesis, my desk.

distance.

This project argues that it is not just the use of cloth that goes unremarked; it is the particular ways fabric has been used to convey instability. Fabric is an accessible means of disrupting received material hierarchies and power structures, particularly in sculpture and installation practices.

Next to the note beside my desk, there is a picture of Marcel Duchamp's *Trois Stoppages Étalons* (*3 Standard Stoppages*), a piece created in 1913, and the work I designate as the first textile-based sculpture in the modern Western canon (Figure 3).

When I refer to Duchamp as the creator of the 'first textile-based sculpture', it is a knowing provocation, debasing the godfather of conceptualism through lowly fibres. It would be more comfortable to just say that this work was made of string and leave it at that. Or initiated with string; it's mostly wood. The string is barely visible in this image.

Duchamp made *3 Standard Stoppages* by dropping three metre-long lengths of thick linen thread on to blue canvases from a height of one metre, their irregular meanderings affixed with glue and then corresponding lengths of wood cut, matching the forms. These measuring sticks became idiosyncratic units that were used in *A Network of Stoppages* and then subsequently in the *Large Glass*. A model was also included in his *Green Suitcase*. Gavin Parkinson (2008) notes that Duchamp created this work at a time of great rupture and change in his practice and *3 Standard Stoppages* was not initially an experiment that Duchamp considered to be "art" (p.114), the methods and materials perhaps too removed from the far narrower paradigms of art practices in the early twentieth century.

Not insignificantly, the works were made a short distance away from Sèvres where the official meter stick is kept in a hermetically sealed box at the International Bureau of Weights and Measurements (Parkinson, 2008). Through this piece, Duchamp delivered a riposte to this 'true' meter stick, this arbitrary, entrenched device. Adhering to his system of constraints, Duchamp created not one, but three standardised measuring units, contingent on the personal and the specific.

3 Standard Stoppages encapsulates the unique material properties of textiles; string was the most direct way to articulate ideas of chance and multiple outcomes. It could not have been substituted for anything else. Even the scribble of a line could not have produced such unplanned results. The string allowed for precision within the constraints of this work, and simultaneously for chaos: the final configuration left to gravity.

Within this piece, the missing cloth lexicon emerges: chance, flexibility, movement, the everyday, the provisional, the contingent. The string proves its fundamental instability; a material so inherently mobile that it had to be fixed down with varnish, mounted onto glass, and then cut out in

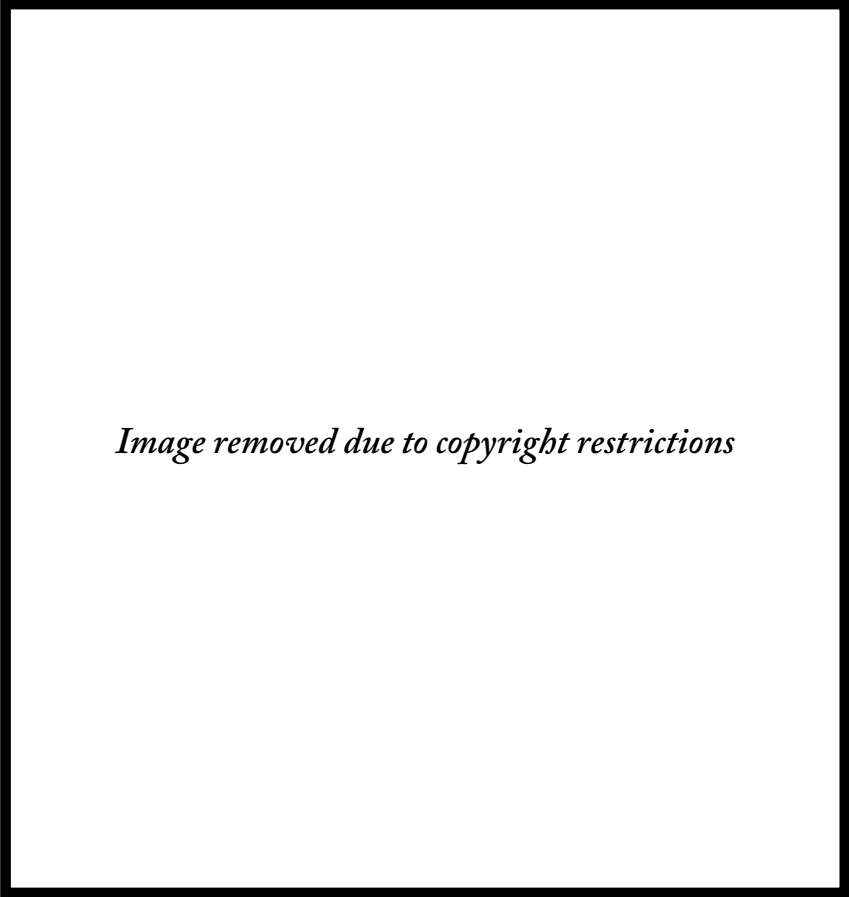


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*Figure 5: Man Ray *L'enigme d'Isidore Ducasse*, 1920, remade 1972.*

sluggish wood to be captured for posterity. These traits echo down through subsequent decades when artists decided to reach for rope, cloth, leather, felt, or lace, materials that fall, fold, resist firm positions, and give way to gravity. Because of its exploitation of an unstable physicality, *3 Standard Stoppages* acts as a more accurate precedent for many of the cloth-based sculptural works that have come afterwards than an ill-defined idea of craft. The exploitation of these characteristics is still an active site of exploration in contemporary practice; these material qualities have been fundamental to my own practice and my constant return to cloth.

Further instances of this shifting material arise after 1913; Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* (1920) comprises of a sewing machine wrapped in cloth and hastily bound with string (Figure 5). Here cloth was used for its ability to cloak but also to suggest the form beneath without overtly revealing it. There is an unfixed nature to this object, a suggestion of a rapid, ever-possible reveal, and a meaning just out of reach of the viewer.

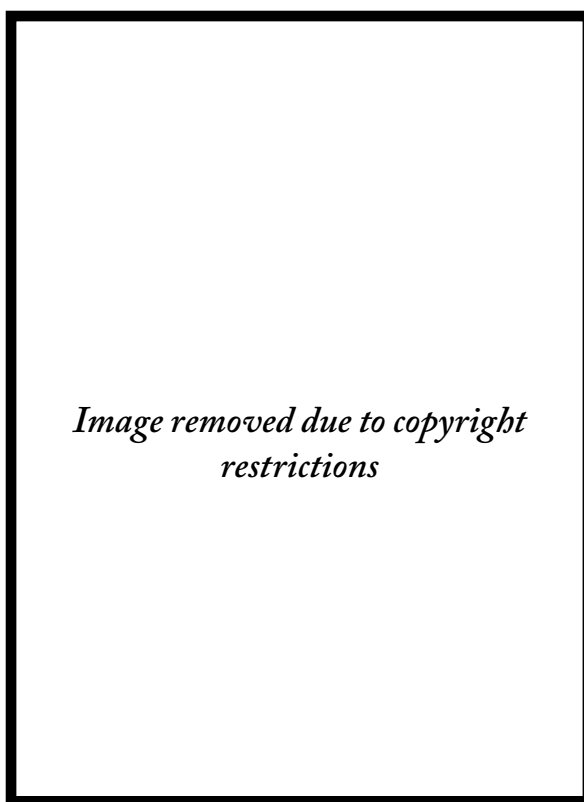
An echo of Duchamp's active string mechanism is also seen in Alberto Giacometti's *Suspended Ball* (1930-31) (Figure 6). Although there is no actual movement in this piece, the string provides the site of possible activation between these highly suggestive forms. This potentiality playing out in the viewer's mind, the swaying, fleshy sphere rubbing across the ridge below.

Even within the uniformly dark, heavy metal of Man Ray's *Gift (Cadeau)* from 1921 there are shifting threads (Figure 7). No fabric is actually present in the clothes iron embellished with rows of small nails. The work is inert and immutable. However, the transactional nature of the object indicated in the title teases us to think about a corresponding spectral mass of torn and shredded garments. The recipient's silks, wools and cottons, pulled, ripped, and snagged into a mass of functionless threads after the new present has been put to use.

Barbara Hepworth's 1946 work *Pelagos*, has seven lengths of string running across the internal void of the sphere (Figure 8).⁵ The string keeps the wood held in tension; should one strand snap, the wood would sigh out of its tight spiral. The strings allude to this gently through small slips into the form, like the laces of our own shoes or clothes. The everyday regularity of the fibres means that we see the tension before the material, despite the very visible pathway of the string as it snakes through the holes.

These shreds of cloth and string continue to flesh-out Duchamp's initial characteristics of textile-based sculpture, criteria that would then be heavily developed later on in the twentieth century. Namely: shifting materials occupying or suggesting different temporalities, found materials suggesting the everyday, and flexible materials demonstrating an indeterminate nature and the possibility of different positions and shapes. In these select high modern instances, string and cloth were employed but rendered static, however the potential for movement was made tantaliz-

⁵ This piece was constructed in close proximity and in conversation with her friend and sometimes collaborator Naum Gabo in St Ives as he developed his own signature 'stringing' techniques (Sidlina 2012).



*Figure 6: Alberto Giacometti, *Suspended Ball*, 1930-31*

ingly possible for the viewer. The collapse was suggested, but the action was frozen; existing in a constant state of possible rupture.

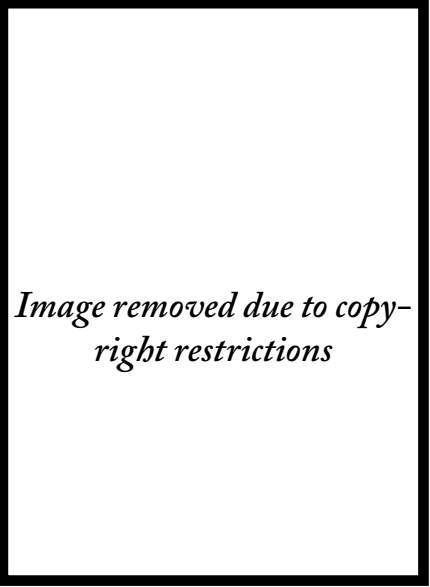
In the decades that followed, and particularly from the 1960s-70s, there was an explosion of works that capitalise on the nature of cloth across the art centres of Europe, and North and South America. Works that unfreeze the movement of fibres and present the viewers with the unfixed, shifting and falling potentiality of cloth.

This text will articulate these instances of instability: the instability of structure, of space, and of time, through case studies that use examples of works from 1913 to the present moment. These works demonstrate fabric's unique role in sculptural practices; artists have chosen cloth for its particular abilities to express these shifting physicalities. Equally, sculpture and installation practices from 1913 onwards have employed cloth in a singular manner that we do not encounter in other contexts; industrial, domestic, or even craft, namely as an autonomous and not supplemental material. A substance removed from its normal function and mined for its formal and material traits and cultural resonances. This use of cloth can be found in some of the most canonical works of the past century, but although the artists are not obscure, the material history that will be drawn out is one that has been silenced and ignored.

Part 3: The Legacy of an Insufficient Medium Specificity

This textile silence could be understood as a result of dismissive attitudes, epitomised in Anatsui's contention that the naming of cloth interrupts the search for the conceptual content of a work and "ends everything", and more broadly, a long period of general disinterest in the articulation of particular material traits.

Focusing on the the material characteristics of cloth, raises the spectre of Clement Greenberg's modernist "medium specificity". In "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940), Greenberg argues for the overt articulation of the specific nature of art apart from other forms of cultural production. Greenberg traces the decline of the 'plastic arts' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the rise of literature and the resulting pressures on painting and sculpture to become increasingly illustrative and 'illusionistic'. Contrasting this to music, a medium less defined by its ability to be representational, and instead an "abstract" art, an art of 'pure form' (p.565) that communicated sensations rather than narratives, Greenberg suggested that painting and sculpture are equally capable of eliciting these sensual responses in viewers, and argues for a focus on form to enable visual art to reach its full potential: "The purely plastic or abstract qualities of the work of art are the only ones that count. Emphasize the medium and its difficulties, and at once the purely plastic, the proper, values of visual art come to the fore." (p.566)



*Image removed due to copy-
right restrictions*

Figure 7: Man Ray *Cadeau (Gift)*, 1921,
remade 1972.

Greenberg's 1960/1965 essay "Modernist Painting" goes on to succinctly summarise this modernist project: "the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincided with all that was unique to the nature of its medium [...] Thereby each art would be rendered "pure"" (p.775).

This model of medium specificity was best exemplified by painting and the resistance of illusionistic opticality. On the few occasions when Greenberg does address sculpture, he praises its ability to escape from illusionistic space entirely and create "objects in the round, through which they can free their feelings for movement and direction" (1965:p.567). Sculptors like Hans Arp and Constantin Brancusi (Figure 9) are noted for their ability to create abstract shapes that defy gravity, overcoming the material weight of bronze and marble to float and soar above the viewer. He praises David Smith and Anthony Caro, or "constructor-sculptors", whose use of newer techniques and materials enabled them to "literally, draw through the air with a single strand of wire". (1958:p.61)

In the introduction to her volume *Materiality*, Petra Lange-Berndt (2015) writes about how this insistence on the "maximum aesthetic purity" championed by Greenberg actually suggests a disinterest in the materiality, a focus on overcoming the physical, real-world traits of material rather than a commitment to fleshing out the meanings and possibilities embedded in paint or stone. It negates the communicative and unkempt potential of specific media, and undermines consideration of the conditions of production embedded in an object (p.13).

Greenberg's embrace of the non-canonical materials and constructions methods used by Smith and Caro does anticipate the expansion of art materials throughout the 1960s, however his emphasis on optical purity created a dead end, not the progressive lineage of experimentation that he wished to forge. In 1953, MoMA acquired *3 Standard Stoppages*, a work that operated outside of Greenberg's model. Lucy Lippard wrote that although Duchamp had been a consistent figure in the New York art scene for much of the century, within the art world of the late 60s and early 70s he was "an obvious art historical source, but in fact most of the artists did not find his work all that interesting." (1997:p. ix) Nevertheless, Duchamp's experimental methods in this work signalled a way forward for a younger generation of artists.

A lack of interest seems to have characterised this percolating historical moment. In her seminal essay "The Aesthetics of Indifference" Moira Roth charts the influence of Duchamp through to John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Jasper Johns. Forming a less cohesive or dogmatic movement than the abstract expressionism championed by Greenberg,⁶ Duchamp was an emblem of another model: intellectual, playful, detached and disinterested in the kind of political instrumentalisation affecting painting.

This emergent, diffuse atmosphere of art making meant that strict approaches to singular media decreased in importance, and process and concept came to the fore. Roth describes the distrust of skill and the aura of the artist's touch: "The taste for ready-made materials and images, and of-

⁶ A person never explicitly named in Roth's text, but imbuing it nonetheless.



Figure 8: Barbara Hepworth, *Pelagos*, 1946.

ten impersonal techniques, brilliantly manoeuvred by Duchamp, Cage, Rauschenberg and Johns, spread generally among artists involved in 'assemblage' and 'junk' sculpture and 'happenings'." (1998:p.39)

Against this historical backdrop, those three pieces of string dropped by Duchamp forty years before became newly and surprisingly relevant, even if not "interesting". Claes Oldenburg and Robert Morris, two artists who would go on to extensively use cloth, both note the early influence of *3 Standard Stoppages* on their practices. Oldenburg encountered it during a touring exhibition at Yale, where he recalls that it had "certainly stuck in my mind" (quoted in Buchloh, 2012:p.102). Morris, in turn, created *Three Rulers* in 1963 in direct response to Duchamp's earlier work; this version comprising three wooden yardsticks, as estimated by the artist, hung to show their varying lengths. In his 1985 interview with Morris, Benjamin Buchloh characterises *3 Standard Stoppages* as "obviously [...] considered by you as one of the most consequential sculptural works of the twentieth century, even though nobody had really picked up on it" (2013:p.56). If the significances of the work were not immediately apparent, there is evidence to suggest that the material properties had infiltrated the art world. Sidney Janis Gallery's 1970 exhibition *String and Rope* saw the space strewn with unkempt piles and knots of the titular materials by artists including Eva Hesse, Oldenburg, Bruce Nauman, Alan Saret, all set alongside *3 Standard Stoppages* (Figure 10).

Although string, rope, felt, and latex were frequently employed materials from the 1960s onwards, the corresponding texts explicitly theorizing these works were primarily interested in capturing the expanded range of everyday matter being used by artists, and the corresponding alterations in process. The writings of the time championed the indeterminate and uncategorized, rather than close readings of particular substances.

In Donald Judd's 1965 essay "Specific Objects" he famously collapses the categories of painting and sculpture, instead describing "three-dimensional art" where the "differences are greater than the similarities" (p.824). In resistance to Greenberg's prescriptive quest for medium specificity, there is an embrace of the heterogeneous. He notes that "a work needs only to be interesting" (p.827). In the final paragraph of "Anti Form" (1968) Robert Morris writes: "Recently, materials other than rigid industrial ones have begun to show up. Oldenburg was one of the first to use such materials. A direct investigation of the properties of these materials is in progress." (1993:p.46) Going on to talk about matter and gravity, casual and imprecise forms, chance and indeterminacy, random piling and loose stacking, Morris articulates concerns of the post-minimal or process moment and provides a succinct description of cloth-based sculpture, echoing the mechanisms seen in earlier Modernist works. But crucially, no material is named explicitly in this passage, and certainly not textiles, despite the primacy given to Oldenburg's work, and Morris' own contemporaneous series of *Felt Pieces*.

Similarly, in her introduction to *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*,

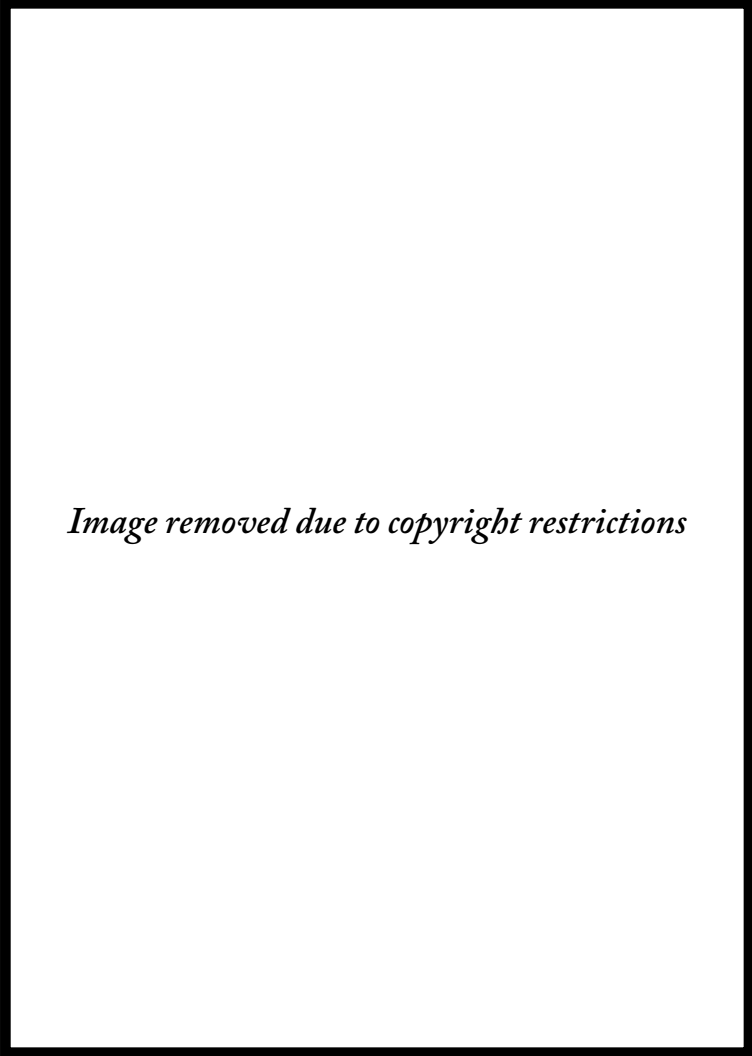


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Figure 9: Constantin Brancusi *Bird in Space*, 1923. Photograph, Edward Steichen 1927.

Lippard defines the Conceptual art documented in the text as: “work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or ‘dematerialized’.” (1997, vii). The term ‘dematerialized’ has periodically been criticised as an inaccurate description of these works of the period, notably by Terry Atkinson of Art and Language in a letter from 1968 (reproduced in Lippard 1997:p.43); however, Lippard persists in using it even while acknowledging the pitfalls as a way to describe the shift from the weighty canonical materials of pre-war sculpture to the expanded materials and methods that came after.

The simultaneous emergence of “Fibre Artists” in America and “Tapestry Artists” in Europe who were explicitly using and, crucially, naming textiles and fibres in their work, was perhaps coincidental, and perhaps indicative of the pedagogical shifts that occurred in art and craft education in the post-war period, but nevertheless complicated the legacy of textile-based sculpture. Through a series of high-profile textile exhibitions starting in the early 1960s, the public was introduced to practitioners who were involved in radical experimentations with weaving, knotting, and dyeing (Figure 11).

These movements also served as a catalyst for the reification of the boundaries between art and craft. As Elissa Auther argues in her comprehensive account of the American fibre arts movements in the 1960s and 70s, *String Felt Thread*, despite these works rejecting the normal characteristics of “craft”, the materials used and the gender of the majority of practitioners designated the works “decorative” (2010), a condition that will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

The explosion of cloth-based works, and the enforced silence about the implications of using fabric, rather than just “soft materials” marked this period. This legacy makes it difficult for a contemporary practitioner who uses textiles, for this contemporary practitioner who uses textiles, to draw upon both the historical lineage instigated by Duchamp’s string, as well as the wider cultural resonances implicit in textiles. Although texts like those of Morris, Judd and Lippard delineated a lexicon that can easily be applied to cloth-based works, their disinterest in specifically naming materials means that the appearance of textiles in contemporary practice still prompts a discourse of craft.

Revisiting how El Anatsui considers his work as distinct from *kente* cloth, he discusses the importance of the “nonfixed form” or textiles that are “always in motion. Anytime you touch something, there is bound to be change” (Anatsui quoted in Vogel 2012:p.119). Anatsui’s pieces shift in each gallery or museum setting as he relinquishes control of the installation to the curator, less interested in determining an ideal configuration, than in the multitudes of forms they could take. This approach suggests a far greater kinship with Morris’ texts and his *Felt Pieces*, than the traditional weavers to whom he is frequently linked. This example is not an attempt to show influence, but rather as an indication of an analogous approach; a thready manifestation of Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome (1987:p7).

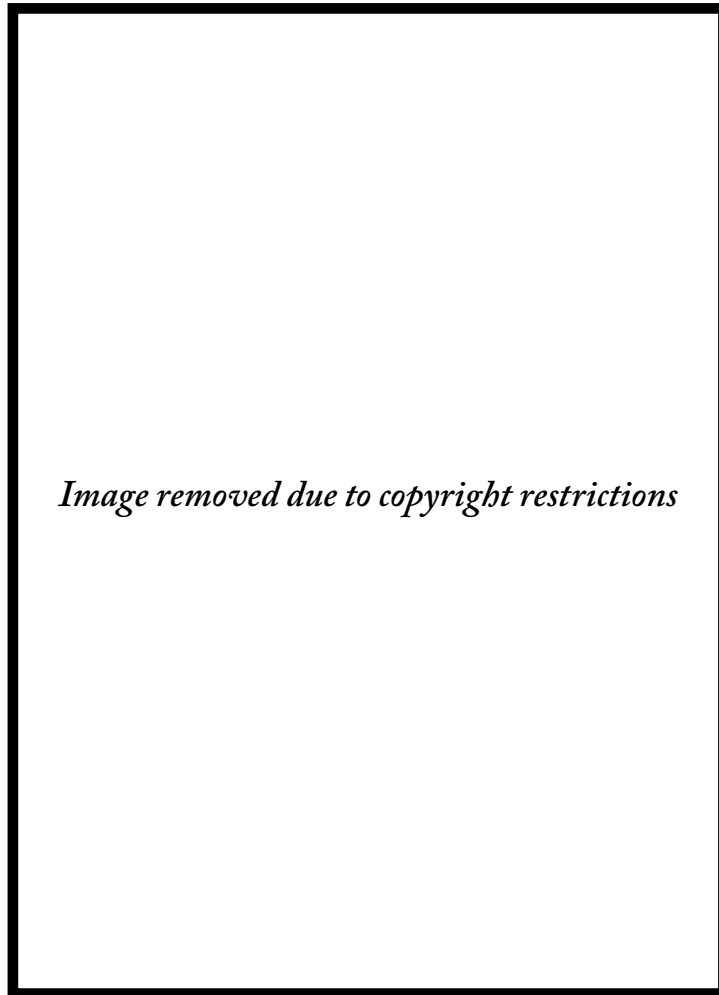


Figure 10: Catalogue cover for *String and Rope*,
Sidney Janis Gallery, 1969.

This lexical desert is not just a condition that affects cloth but many, if not all, of the non-canonical materials that have been used in the post-Greenbergian period. It fundamentally alters the ways in which we consider the myriad of other materials that are used in contemporary practice. Rosalind Krauss has examined this post-material context in her two texts *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post Medium Condition* (1999) and *Under Blue Cup* (2011). Krauss is suspect of the possibility of resuscitating the term “medium specificity” from the “brute positivism” of Greenberg (2011:p.7). However, feeling as though there is not a satisfactory replacement, she endeavours to realign it to something more enriched, and more medieval – aligning the specific traits of materials to the guild system, looking for systemic “logics” of materials, the “supports” inherent in the processes of the matter.

Krauss identifies three factors that created the post-media condition; a rejection of the minimalist literal object leading to Lippard’s ‘dematerialized’ art; the primacy of the idea over the object in conceptual art; and the establishment of Duchamp’s practice as the seminal artistic paradigm of the twentieth century. These confluent circumstances forced artists to seek out non-traditional mediums for exploration, pushing artistic practice into unexpected territories through these new “technical supports” (2011:p.20).

Krauss’ advocates a contemporary guild system that recognises the material mastery of artists like Ed Ruscha, William Kentridge or Sophie Calle, an approach that echoes the impulse Berndt-Lange identifies in Anglo-American theory that links artistic proficiency to an ability to overcome the material, bringing it to heel. My research project proposes a different tack, one more appropriate to the wide and varied usage of cloth. Rather than the creation of a guild, the following text suggests a taxonomy of works that exploit the material and social resonances of fabrics and fibres. Duchamp is not a Textile Artist; the rest of his practice negates that title. But a claim can be made that *3 Standard Stoppages* is a textile work. These are the instances that will be investigated through this text; sculptural moments when objects become, soft, fibrous and falling.

Part 4: Research Parameters, Language and the Construction of the Document

This project draws out the historical use of textiles in sculpture and installation practices from 1913 until now, and identifies the ways in which artists have used this material to explore the unstable. This investigation has been undertaken in order to enrich the historical material narratives available to contemporary practitioners; available to my own practice.

The term “unstable” has been selected for three reasons, firstly, it suggests something structural, but also social and temporal. Instability implies the relinquishing of permanence into an unpredictable and transitory state, and this corresponds to the ways that cloth is used in the sculptural works discussed in this text; objects always on the verge of a shift or a collapse, and objects that




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Figure 11: Lenore Tawney exhibition at Benson Gallery, 1967.

shift and collapse the time and space in which they are positioned. Secondly, the term is relatively uncolonised within art writing; it has not been used to define particular moments or movements and thus can be used to re-examine works from across the past century without great lexical baggage. Finally, it is a term that feels accurate in relation to the ways that textiles are used in my own practice, and to the shifting, slumping and repositioned objects that I make.

To further interrogate how textiles in sculptural practices have been understood in the twentieth century, Chapter 2 reviews the presentation of these art historical accounts. Exhibitions from the 1960s onwards have attempted to position cloth in relation to more canonical art materials and practices, arguing for equivalencies, or for the unique and exceptional textile usage of individual artists. This chapter surveys these exhibitions and the accompanying catalogues and also details the manner in which the emerging field of Textile Studies has encountered this legacy.

Chapter 3 details the research and studio methodologies employed during this project. The connection between practice and research is one that perhaps needs to be explicitly drawn out in this still new territory of practice-led PhD research. This section describes how my previous knowledge and experience with cloth informed my research, and in turn how the knowledge gained throughout this process has altered the way I consider my studio work. The evolution of my research question is also detailed, as I initially intended to explore a very different question. Finally, I address the ways in which I balanced making sculptural work and concurrently researching and writing a sustained text; processes that are demanding and engrossing in their own disparate ways.

The three chapters that follow present case studies investigating instances of structural, spatial and temporal instability in works of textile-based art. Framing these discussions are archetypal figures who have also used these characteristics of fabric within their own narratives. The first case study, Chapter 4: Structure, examines the particular moment in the 1960s and 70s when coincidental post-minimal or process art, and “fiber” or “tapestry” movements arose. While the resulting work can appear superficially similar, this chapter will use the mythological figure of Penelope weaving and unweaving at her loom to analyse the convergent and divergent aims of these movements. This cycle of construction and destruction serves as a model to separate the motivations of these groups and enables an investigation into how autonomy was both exerted and relinquished through fabric, corresponding to the artists’ varying political and creative contexts.

Chapter 5: Space, uses Robert Bresson’s eponymous character from *A Man Escaped* to explore how small textile interventions have been used to subvert power structures, particularly in the built environment. This chapter will contrast a tactic of flexible and furtive “tents” with the strategy of sanctioned, solid pavilions.

In Chapter 6: Temporality, the nineteenth century Parisian figure of the Rag Picker, described by Charles Baudelaire and fleshed-out by Walter Benjamin, archives and creates the city through the

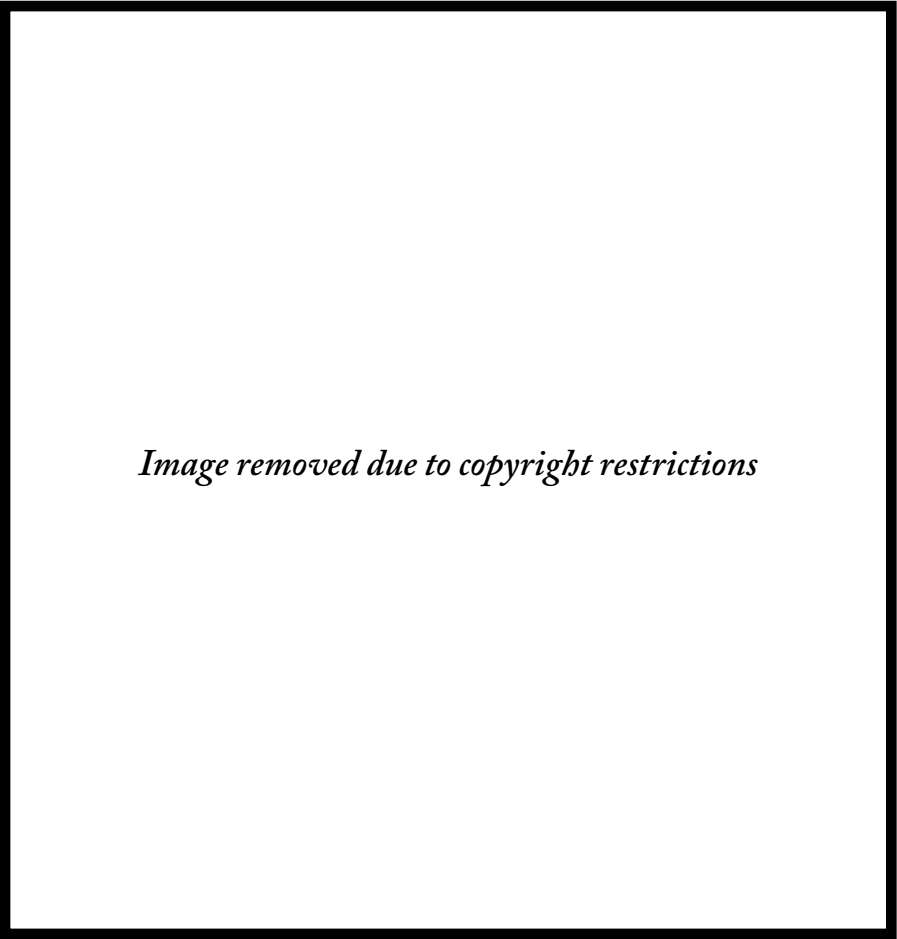


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Figure 12: Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept 'Waiting'*, 1960

ever-shifting collection of rags in his refuse basket. This section posits that the flexible and shifting nature of cloth enables an uncertain and unfixed relationship with time, and that this mutable nature can be subverted or exacerbated through the added layer of lens-based media.

Interspersed between the chapters are sections of reflective writing that capture the process of making the large sculptural pieces *Breeze Block Pile I* and *II*. These passages were originally written as a stand-alone text and only later were the sections distributed amongst the “main” chapters of the thesis. As a result, it acts as a parallel timeline of studio production, at times aligning with the text and at other times disrupting the theoretical narratives. The reflective writing was informed by similar pieces by other artists, and particularly Elizabeth Price’s “sidekick” (2006).

Alongside this dissertation is also a polemical missive with the self-explanatory title *A handbook for curators interested in using cloth in their exhibitions*. These shifts in voice serve to illuminate the decisions, anxieties and discomforts of producing work, and then anticipating how these textile-based sculptures might be received in the wider world. These two experimental modes of writing are also a means of positioning my own practice in relation to the weighty historical lineages presented in the dissertation. Rather than embedding my work within these discussions of larger movements – as if suggesting an equivalency between my practice and some of the more iconic pieces of the past century – this is a deliberate distancing tactic.

The scope of my research has been restricted by consciously limiting the investigation to sculpture and installation. These terms are interpreted very broadly and include a variety of interventions in public spaces, and sculptural objects in photography and film. This emphasis on object-based work is two-fold: my own work largely falls within this territory and therefore these practices, and the particular questions and strategies they entail, continue to be of the most relevance. Secondly, it is useful to separate the use of textiles in sculptural practices from the ways in which textiles have been revealed and manipulated on the pictorial plane. Other lineages of fabric in art could be drawn from the emergence of fibres between the gaps of brushstrokes in early Modernist works, to Picasso’s inclusion of chair caning in his painting, to Lucio Fontana’s slashed canvases (Figure 12), and Robert Rauschenberg’s assemblages. Although these uses of textiles are also disruptions, or instabilities, it is of a different nature; intent on revealing the illusionistic space within the frame and denying the aesthetic autonomy of the work. This demarcation is artificial, however, given the constraints of the dissertation, it is a necessity.

Finally, a note about my material language. The spelling of the word ‘fibre’ will at times shift to the American ‘fiber’ when used to describe artists engaged in the “Fiber Movements” of the 1960s and 1970s. This is in recognition of this term being both historically and geographically specific.

In this document I will also use “textile”, “cloth” and “fabric” interchangeably. Each of these terms derives from a particular etymological pathway and therefore has a slightly different connotation;

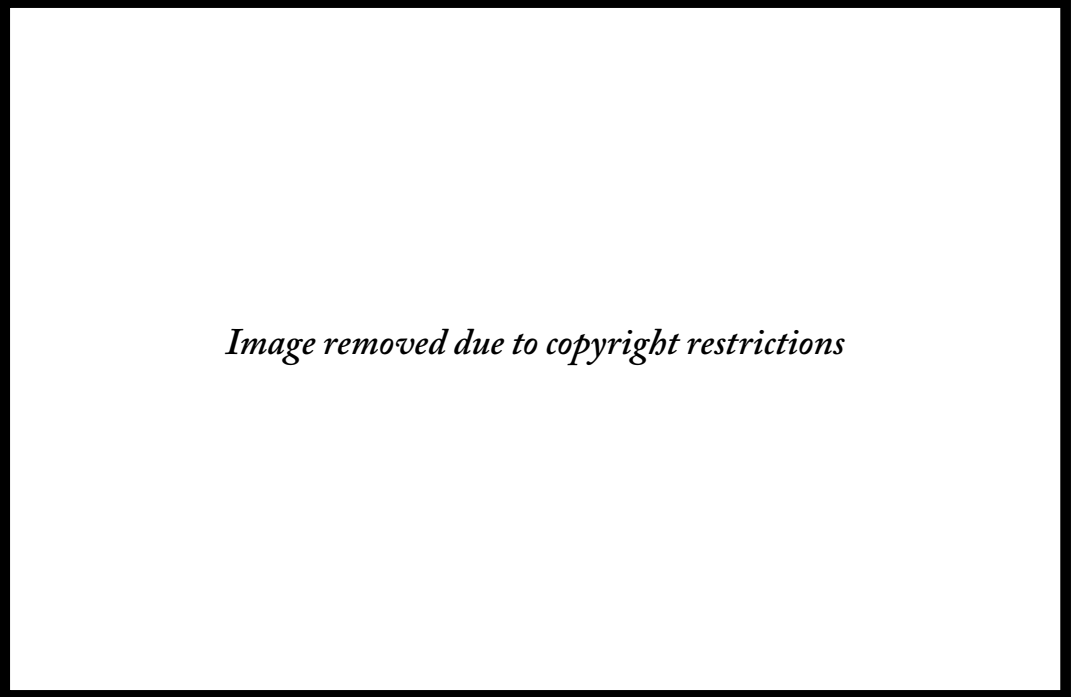


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Figure 13: Marcel Duchamp, 3 Standard Stoppages, 1913

“textiles” coming from the Ancient Greek term for weaving *texere*, (Mitchell 2007: p.7) and still the term most associated with industry and production. “Fabric” comes from Latin by way of Middle French refers to building, or artisans making things from materials (similarly to “fabricating”); its association with textiles a relatively late development. Of the eight listings for the term in the Oxford English Dictionary with examples dating from 1483, the definition of “a woven stuff” appears fourth, with the first example dating from 1753 (OED online). “Cloth” descends from an Old English word for garment, and still often indicates an article of clothing, or a piece of fabric that has been finished for a purpose (e.g. tablecloth). Of the three terms, it is the noun most removed from the act of production and linked to the final product (OED online). Despite this variation, present-day common usage treats these terms as largely synonymous, defining them broadly as a flexible material formed of fibres.

However, within the specialised lexicon of fine art and craft, there are preferences for certain terms in certain contexts. “Textiles” is largely excluded from descriptions of work within a fine art context, where either the specific type of textiles (e.g. rope or felt), or the characteristics of the cloth, for example when discussing “soft sculpture”, or the term “material” are preferred. Although in current usage “material” may often be synonymous to fabric or cloth, given its prevalent use within fine art to refer to any media used by artists, I will refrain from using it to refer specifically to cloth. Textile or fibre are popular terms in craft given their relationship to production. My decision to use these terms equally maps common usage and resists the political hierarchies instilled in fine art writing.



Figure 14: Label from yarn used to make *Breeze Block II*

First Day

"If you are going to use all of that wool, you're more patient than me!"

The young woman ringing up my sale really wants me to tell her what I am making. What my plans are for the two large balls, a total of 800 grams of camel-flecked black yarn, a 70% acrylic and 30% wool mix.

"Are you knitting or is it crochet?"

"Knitting", I say quickly. Lying. Trying to lie more. What could I possibly be knitting with so much dark material? Tell her something, I urge myself. But I can't think quickly enough.

"It's a big project!" I say finally. By this time she's lost interest my activities and has just started to distantly wonder about me. She's probably picked up on my accent, too, and that's not going to help matters. My card transaction completes, and I stuff the wool into my bag and leave.

800 grams is a fair amount of wool. She's quite right. A normal ball will likely weigh either 50 grams or 100 grams, so I've either just purchased 16 or 8 balls of yarn and that would be enough to knit almost any kind of garment.

When you buy wool for a project you're supposed to buy the right amount all in one go, maybe throwing in an extra ball just in case. Wool is dyed in lots, you find the number printed on the side of the label, and ideally you want all of your wool to come from the same lot. That will give you consistent colour. But I don't quite know what I'm making so I don't quite know how much I need. I also feel like dyeing technologies have advanced enough to make this barely a necessity. I'm not sure my mostly synthetic yarn even has a dye lot.

It does, well one ball does: 50983. The other ball was missing its label altogether. But I just bought all they had, these two big balls.

800 grams might be enough. This piece that I'm starting to make is the largest that I've made so far, or it's the largest that I've planned to make. No use getting ahead of myself.

Now back in my studio, I'm wondering if I should have said crocheting instead of knitting. Is that a more accurate comparison? Or been even more honest and just said rug hooking. Actually, that would have solved all of my problems.

"Oh, I'm hooking a little rug for in front of the fire. I figured the dark wool wouldn't show much soot or ash. Our little cat loves to sit in front of the fire, so I'm just making a little rug for him"



Figure 15: Breeze Block Pile I, in progress

That's what this process resembles most. I fashion a little loop out of one strand of picture hanging wire. It's a small enough gauge to fit through the plastic cells of my rug's backing, and rigid enough to hold up to all of the pushing and pulling that's about to come.

800 grams might not be enough to finish the whole piece. I could try to work it out. An initial calculation seems to indicate that I would need 68 balls of yarn to finish this section. That seems...high. It would be nearly impossible to source that number. Instead, I just make a start.

The next stage is to wrap the wool around my clear plastic ruler. This will give me consistent lengths to work with.

The wool is weighty enough to sit on the floor undisturbed as I pull length after length away from its mass, pooling enough yarn around me to then be able to wrap it around the ruler with ease for a few dozen turns. After that, I pull off another pool and keep going until the broad rectangular ruler, 30 cm long, is covered in dense strands.

I try not to pull the yarn too tautly across the ruler, but when I cut through the strands, they inevitably jump up. Although the lengths should be 60 cm, when I measure them after they've been cut, they're closer to 55cm. This discrepancy doesn't matter as long as I keep it consistent across all of the lengths I cut, as long as I try to remember just how taut the wool is before I cut it and it snaps back.

The first step is to push the loop of wire up through the mesh, then take a length of wool, fold it in half and using the wire, pull the doubled bit of yarn through the plastic. I then push the wire down to the back, catch the loop of yarn and pull it back up. The two ends of the wool are pulled through the woollen loop and the knot is tightened.

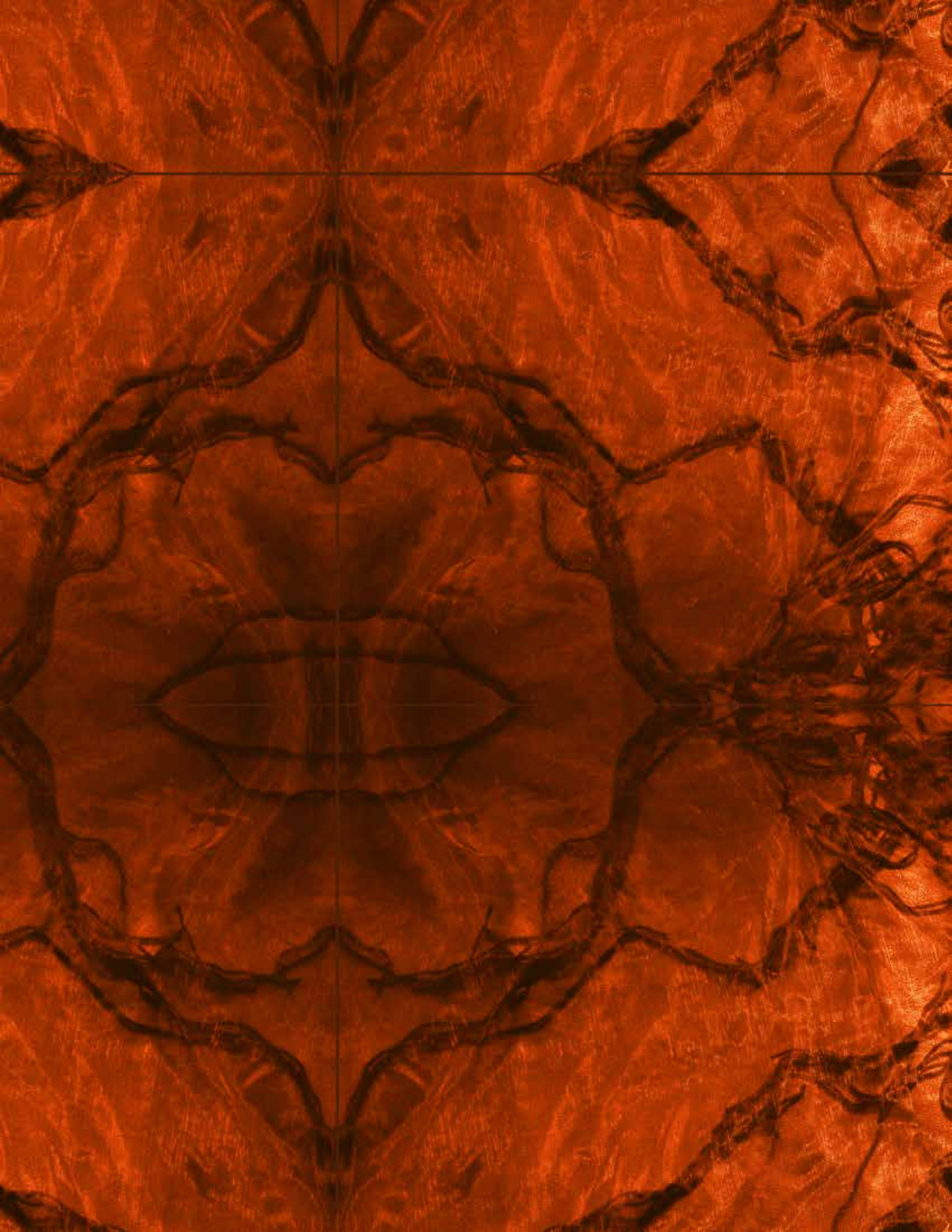
I do this over and over again and time slips except for when I become impatient and turn it over. If I was making a normal rug, the front would be facing me the entire time, and I would have a steady sense of how it was shaping up. But for these pieces, I'm more interested in the back. In the little knots that form as a tight focal point in the great mass of a long pile. Because of this interest, because of a fetishistic desire to see them amass, I keep on turning it over. I feel better and better as the very ugly plastic is covered and the woollen shape emerges.

This first day I've knotted two rulers' worth of yarn and my back is sore, my joints are stiff and aching and I'm pretty preoccupied with thoughts of food. But as the project is now underway, I know I can just pick it up again at any moment. A few hours after dinner. Gaps in the afternoon. When I'm too tired to write anything sensible towards my dissertation, I know I can pick up the wire loop and just knot a bit of yarn.

I make this thing in order to throw it onto the floor. In order for it to disregard any intention I may have for it. Almost zoomorphic, it can rest warmly on my lap.



Narrative Review



Narrative Review

Part 1: Introduction

Given the ubiquity of textiles, it remains an under-theorised material particularly within contemporary sculptural practices. A conventional literature review does not elicit a satisfactory answer to the primary question underpinning this project: how have artists used fabric in twentieth century sculpture and installation? Results from searches of 'textile' or 'cloth' and 'sculpture' are few, without pointing to texts that chart the overarching material and cultural themes and nuances of cloth-based works within sculptural practices.

In the emergent field of textile theory, a robust body of literature examines the role of cloth in all aspects of society, but as yet, this has not included a thorough exploration of its unique function in artistic practice, particularly in canonical works from the post-war period onwards. Instead, explicit accounts of the ways in which textiles have been presented within the context of twentieth century art can be found in 'Textile Survey' exhibitions and catalogues. Examples of these shows are investigated to understand how cloth has been theorised and the attempts to confront its peripheral and secondary status. The Fabric Workshop and Museum offers an interesting counterpoint to these exhibitions; despite its name, this longstanding institution has a legacy of minimising the materiality of cloth in their ambitious collaborations with artists; arguably in order to operate more successfully within the realms of fine art. This approach is juxtaposed with cases of celebrated individual artists, Louise Bourgeois and Richard Tuttle, who have had exhibitions and publications focussing on their valorised use of cloth. Finally, examples of high-profile exhibitions in commercial gallery spaces are investigated to understand the ongoing legacy of cloth's suppressed and under-articulated position.

Part 2: Emergent Textile Theory

Recently, a number of volumes have pulled together key texts of textile theory, most of it written in the preceding few decades and surveying vast cultural and historical periods. For example, *Textiles: The Whole Story: Uses, Meanings, Significance* (Beverly Gordon, 2011), attempts to account for the ways in which all humans, across all continents, have used cloth for spiritual purposes, shelter, clothing, and industry from the beginning of civilization to the present day.

Narrowing this scope, Bloomsbury published the four-volume *Textiles: Critical and Primary Sources*, each book focussing on the areas of History/Curation, Production, Science and Technology, and Identity. Along with Gordon's text, the breadth of these tomes attests to the far-reaching nature of textiles and the primacy of the material in every sector of our global culture. However,

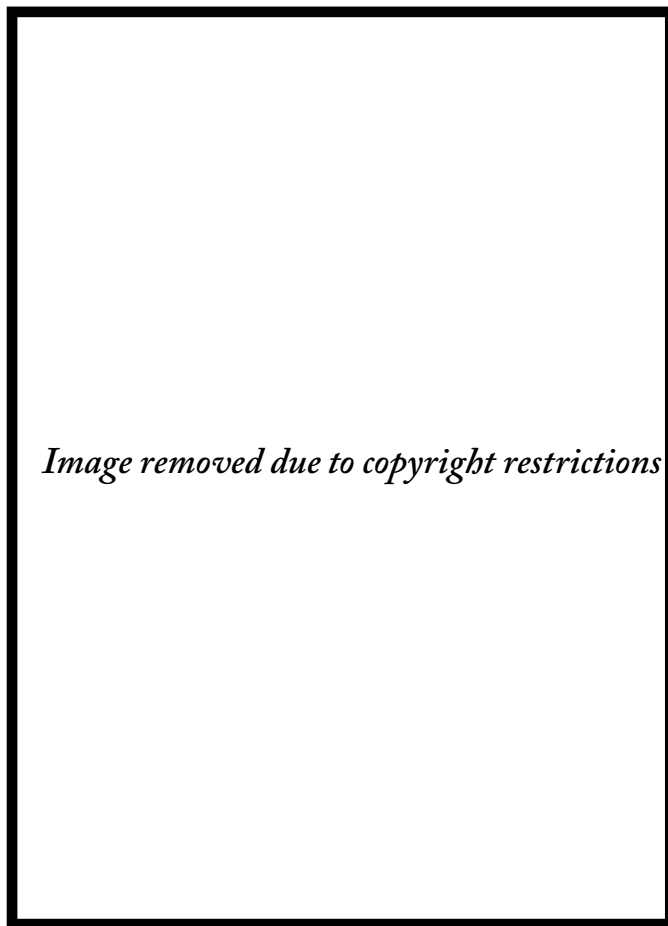


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*Figure 16: Catalogue Cover for *Wall Hangings*, MoMA, 1969*

despite this scope, contemporary art is not a focus of these texts, and examples of mainstream Western practice prior to the past decade rarely feature. The curatorial volume is primarily museological in emphasis, and although some of the articles discuss the use of cloth-based techniques by individual feminist-informed artists, the texts do not address the ubiquity of cloth within wider artistic production and how it has been employed by people working outside of a feminist narrative. It also avoids the spiky exclusion of textiles from the dominant Western art narrative of the past fifty years.

The Textile Reader published in the same year does broach this territory, particularly through the inclusion of a text by Elissa Auther that subsequently developed into *String, Felt, Thread* and comprehensively documents the prejudicial treatment of post-war fiber artists in an American context. But as this volume also documents the rich diversity of what cloth means and how it has been considered and written about globally, the relative inconsequentiality of the use and dismissal of textiles within canonical Western fine art is illustrated in its limited inclusion. Fabric's global meaning is of much greater significance, and the art world's stubborn refusal to treat it with interest is not given undue consideration.

In these volumes, cloth is theorised when it is explicitly proclaimed by the artists in question. Its use in art is presented as an exploration of the personal, the domestic, the feminine, and the wider application of the material by artists of all identities and working outside of, or at the intersections of these concerns, is not recounted. Investigations into the ways in which artists have exploited these material and cultural properties are partial and elusive.

Part 3: Wall Hangings and the Art Fabric

Instead, the Textile Survey format of exhibition provides more overt accounts of cloth in sculptural practices. Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen created the prototype for these shows in 1969 with *Wall Hangings* at MoMA (Figure 16).¹ In this early project, the curators anticipated ushering in a new form of art; large-scale and technically innovative tapestry and woven works. The artists featured were drawn from both the emergent American Fiber Art and European Tapestry Movements and the curators made firm connections to their Bauhaus-influenced and industry-informed pedagogical backgrounds, or, for the Eastern European artists, the understanding of weaving as the 'people's art'. Constantine and Larsen suggest that the textile industry was by then so advanced, practitioners had two possible paths: "He could either continue as a designer for industry, or pursue the exploration of textiles for non-utilitarian purposes, notably hangings." (1969:p.3) In other words, in order to engage with the making of cloth, one had to reject the factories and invent new forms and processes.

1 "Woven Forms" at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York was mounted in 1963, but although it featured a number of the same artists, the exhibition did not attempt to introduce the works as fine art in the same manner as Constantine and Larsen's show.

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*Figure 17: Jagoda Buic (left), Francoise Grossen (right). From *Beyond Craft: The Art of Fabric* by Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen, 1972.*

Constantine and Larsen refer to the included artists as ‘modern weavers’, differentiating them from ‘modern tapestry designers’ whose considerations of bright colour is different from a weaver’s concern of construction, and the production of volume (1969:p.5). They are articulating a difference between fabric’s painterly qualities and its sculptural potential, placing the works in *Wall Hangings* in the latter category despite their stated reliance on the architectural space.

It would have been easy to imagine that this large show mounted in a pre-eminent venue would have been enough to grant legitimacy to these new experimentations. After all, the show was well-attended, subsequently travelled to California, and gave rise to a number of other exhibitions that continued to showcase these artists. As Auther notes, these works also tapped into an American craft revivalist tendency, and helped to fuel the resurrection of macramé and other hand-crafts (p.26). The pieces in the show were ground-breaking and innovative, and these artists had turned away from industrial considerations and adhered to the rules of art.

However, the show was largely ignored by the art establishment save one review written by Louise Bourgeois who explained that “a painting or a sculpture make great demands on the onlooker at the same time that is independent of him. These weaves, delightful as they are, seem more engaging and less demanding [...] they would fall somewhere between fine and applied art” (quoted in Auther, 2010:pxii). Within this summation, Bourgeois articulates a modernist position of artistic autonomy that would have precluded the domestic resonances of the works in the show, hence her positioning of the works somewhere beyond the borders of acceptable artistic practice without entirely dismissing them as ‘applied’. Constantin and Larsen followed up the exhibition with further publications including *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric* (1986) and *The Art Fabric: Mainstream* (1981) that continue to promote these artists (Figure 17), but their efforts created neither the “Art Fabric” movement, nor the mainstream acceptance they sought.

Auther has conducted in-depth research into the textile tensions that arose during this period in the aforementioned *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (2010). This volume focuses on the very different critical receptions received by American “Fiber Artists” and artists associated with Process Art or Post-Minimalism. As she explains, “this study tells a story in which there are winners and losers when it comes to recognition and prestige in the field of art” (p.xxi). Using examples that extend to the present day, Auther argues that the persistent feminisation and de-intellectualising of the works of “Fiber Artists” has led to the disregard of their work. Meanwhile, pieces by Morris, or Eva Hesse that use similar materials are highly valued examples of twentieth century art.

While the account of the prejudiced reception of these works is very persuasive, Auther dedicates a substantial amount of space to addressing the historical and social contexts of the works while side-lining the methods and context of production. In the author’s dedicated effort to establish the hierarchies of art and craft, binaries are created that obscure the intention of the makers, and

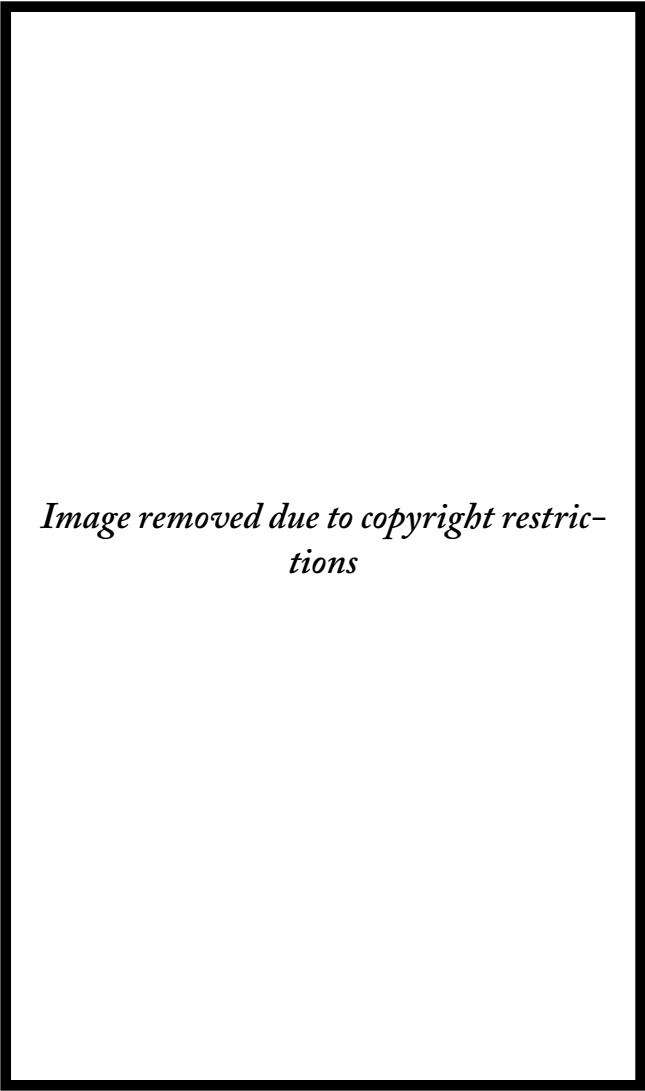


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*Figure 18: Alice Adams and Alan Saret in Elissa Auther's
String Felt Thread*

the ways in which they are using this common material. Considering the subtleties of these areas is important to reveal fundamental differences in how the works operated. This reductive approach also disguises similarities in the works that go beyond their formal qualities; both movements (in as much as they can be termed as such) can be understood as divergent responses to an increasingly hyper-industrialised society; one camp using the detritus of the industrial process to demonstrate its fallibility, the other, as suggested by Constantin and Larsen, taking matters quite literally into their own hands and crafting new forms, new structures with rough, tactile fibres.

As an example, Auther presents two images of contemporaneous rope works: *Untitled* by Alan Saret (1968) and *Construction* by Alice Adams (1966). Auther highlights the similarities in the works as they are both: "...floor-based and of similar size and shape, and significantly, both utilize materials associated with so-called craft, hand labor, or industry" (2010:p.1). The text goes on to explain that while these two works appear to be similar, they were created by artists working in different spheres, Saret a sculptor associated with Process Art and Adams a trained weaver linked to the Fiber Arts movement.

In Auther's detailed account, the different receptions of these works is of prime importance, however despite the veracity of her argument, these comparisons obscure differences of intention and approach in the pieces, evident in the titles alone. Adams' *Construction* is directing the viewer precisely to the process and outcome of her labour, and the indeterminate function of the object. The title implies either a mid or end point of a process, and yet the still-loose and coiling ends resist a clear understanding of the intention and motivation of the maker. Saret's *Untitled* does not give the viewer the same direction; with this work we do not know whether we are looking at a process, or a finished arrangement. Are these weighty, industrially-made ropes about to be used? Have they been cast aside after serving a mysterious function? Has the particular position of the ropes been carefully orchestrated, or simply heaped onto the floor, an accidental, snaking mass? Adams presents the viewer with a process and perhaps a resolution; but one that is resistant to the normal functions associated with the basketry techniques she employed. Saret presents something far more ambiguous and temporally elusive, using the unpredictable nature of the ropes to evade a clear reading.

Although the works do bear a resemblance when reduced to small black and white images (Figure 18), the scales are not comparable, with Saret's twice the dimensions at 48 by 48 inches across versus Adams' 20 by 24 inches. The resulting effect on the viewer would conceivably have been quite different as the strands shift from objects that could be held within both hands to unwieldy ropes capable of subsuming a whole body. In addition to Auther's argument about the inequitable responses the works received, these objects metonymically operate as signs of the different spheres of production in which they were operating, a context that will be investigated in greater detail in Chapter 4. The morphological similarities of the pieces are red herrings; these are entirely different works in their inception, not just their reception.

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*Figure 19: Keith Viner and Eva Hesse in *Eccentric Abstraction*, 1966*

Part 4: The Textile Survey Show Versus the Heroic Softness

The legacy of Constantin and Larsen's project was not boundary crushing, but definition; by articulating the particularities, materials, and methods of the Fiber and Tapestry artists, they reified a position against which fine art could define itself. When Lucy Lippard mounted her celebrated exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction* in 1966, she included works by artists who were subsequently slotted into both categories including post-minimalists such as Hesse and Fiber artists like Adams. In her description of the works in the show and the curatorial rationale, Lippard emphasised the "sensuous" and "evocative qualities" of the soft objects on show as an imaginative "expansion" to the "solemn and deadset Minimalism" without the "sacrifice (of) the solid formal basis demanded of the best in current non-objective art" (1992:p.83). Lippard's framing of the works in the show alluded to the importance of the soft materiality and provocative experimentation, without naming specific materials or processes. Equally, by positioning the pieces as a dialectical response to the rigidity of Minimalism, the works could be considered within the realms of fine art practice (Figure 19). This enabled works that were blatant textile experimentations including pieces by Hesse and Keith Viner to escape the not-fine-art, not-applied-art territory that Bourgeois defined in relation to *Wall Hangings*.

Subsequent overtly textile exhibitions had to contend with an unjust castigation of stigmatised fibre work and entrenched 'art' and 'craft' divisions. The ensuing tactic has been to create exhibitions with the primary aim of arguing for the artistic legitimacy of Fiber and Tapestry works in the hopes of dissolving these categories. This understandable emphasis means that the corollary question of why 'mainstream' artists have used cloth, is given brief and dissatisfying attention. The exhibitions that do allude to this lineage, do so without the language of textiles, once again recreating the dynamic of the overt, and articulated 'craft' cloth, and the 'soft' suppressed language of art exhibitions.

In the forward of the catalogue for ICA Boston's 2013 show *Fibre: Sculpture 1960-Present*, Director Jill Memvedow states that this is the first exhibition "in four decades to assemble and address these artists, until now underrecognized or long-forgotten" (p.7). There are perhaps qualifiers that should be attached to this claim; it could more accurately be described as the first major American exhibition to reappraise this narrative, however this framing does position the exhibition as the successor to *Wall Hangings* which along with Constantine and Larsen's subsequent books, are cited as direct precedents by the show's curator, Jenelle Porter (2013:p.177). Unlike the tightly focussed MoMA exhibition, *Fibre: Sculpture 1960-Present* brings together global works spanning the 55 years of the title and juxtaposing a range of materials and approaches. Despite this breadth, the account of the material is intentionally lopsided; the exhibition highlights works that explicitly use methods of textile construction, and emphasizes the manipulation of fibres, while excluding the textile-based post-war mainstream art.

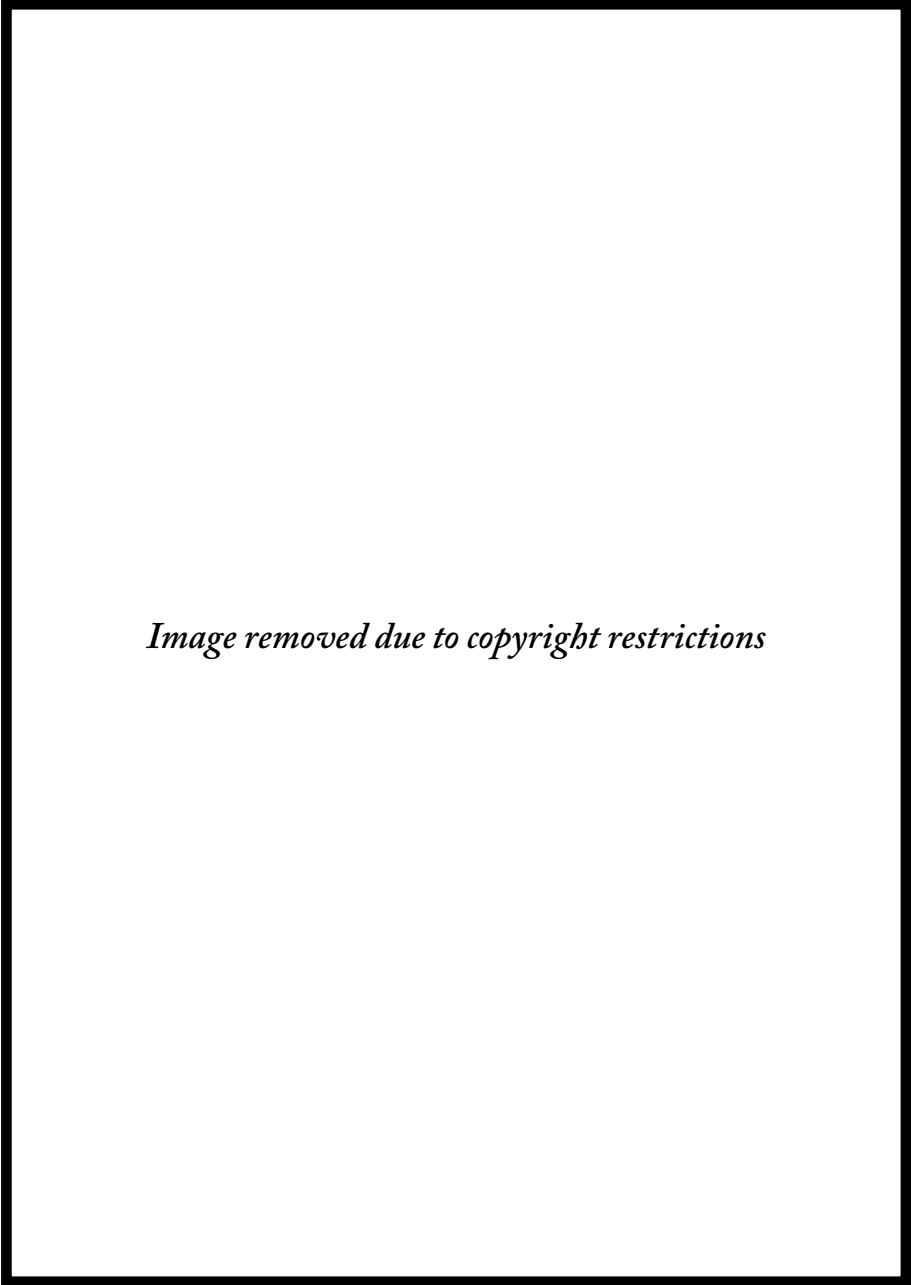


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*Figure 20: Faith Wilding, Crocheted Environment, Reconstructed in 2015 for Fibre:
Sculpture 1960 - Present*

Glenn Adamson sketches a parallel lineage of cloth to the works in the exhibition, suggesting that some of the works are linked by their investigation of ‘flaccidity’, an under-theorised attribute in Western thought. He suggests that: “[a]n erratic but nonetheless perceptible line extend[s] from the dropped threads of Marcel Duchamp’s *Three Standard Stoppages* (...) to the drooping, coiling, spilling, and curling forms of Hesse, Morris, Heisler, Hicks, and their peers.” (2013:p.148) This particular material history however is not drawn out in either the catalogue or the show; Porter instead follows a more established model for Textile Survey exhibitions, beginning the narrative at the point of fibre’s schism in the 1960s and not including the works of Morris, Oldenburg or Duchamp.

Fibre: Sculpture 1960 – Present, much like the 2015 publication and exhibition *Open Textiles* chooses a singular textile creation myth on which to focus, namely the pedagogic influence of the Bauhaus diaspora, and resists the complications of Duchamp’s string. Given the importance placed on weaving in *Textiles: Open Letter*, the works included are primarily flat experimentations with rectilinear forms, even from artists whose practice routinely ventures beyond those constraints, such as Rosemarie Trockel. Instead, they emphasise the subtle, precise pencil-marked threads of Agnes Martin and the balanced, immaculate works of seminal weavers Anni Albers and Gunta Stölz. The textile experimentation of mainstream mid-twentieth century sculpture is absent, with the exception of Hesse whose work appears in both shows; the curators perhaps feeling that these canonical works have had adequate exposure.

Considered in relation to exhibitions such as *Formless: A User’s Guide*, the major 1997 exhibition at Centre Pompidou curated by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, this is a correct assumption. Using the fragmentary passage “L’Informe” by George Bataille written in 1929, Krauss and Bois present an aggressively hyper-masculine meditation on the slippages and entropic elements of twentieth century art. Although beginning with Manet’s *Olympia*, the formlessness of textile-based works by Duchamp, Morris, Fontana and Oldenburg are all signalled as key moments in this critical discourse. Women mostly appear as subjective bodies, with only brief appearances by Hesse, Katarzyna Kobro, Lygia Clark and Cindy Sherman throughout the vast text. The specific resonances of cloth are not seen to be relevant, despite the material’s intrinsic importance in many of the works discussed.

This heroic language was repeated in the recent exhibition *Risk* presented at The Turner Contemporary in 2015. This project proposed the investigation of various manifestations of chance across artistic practices ranging from the otherwise controlled canvases of Gerhard Richter pulled with a squeegee to create an unpredictable final image, to the very perilous, and ultimately deadly solo crossing of the Atlantic undertaken by Bas Jan Ader. In the midst of this vast spectrum are situated three cloth-based pieces: Marcel Duchamp’s *3 Standard Stoppages* (1913–14), Eva Hesse’s *One More than One* (1967), and Robert Morris’ felt *Wall Hanging (Tenture)* (1969–70) (Figure 21). Within the context of the show, these textile works serve to illustrate the process-based risks

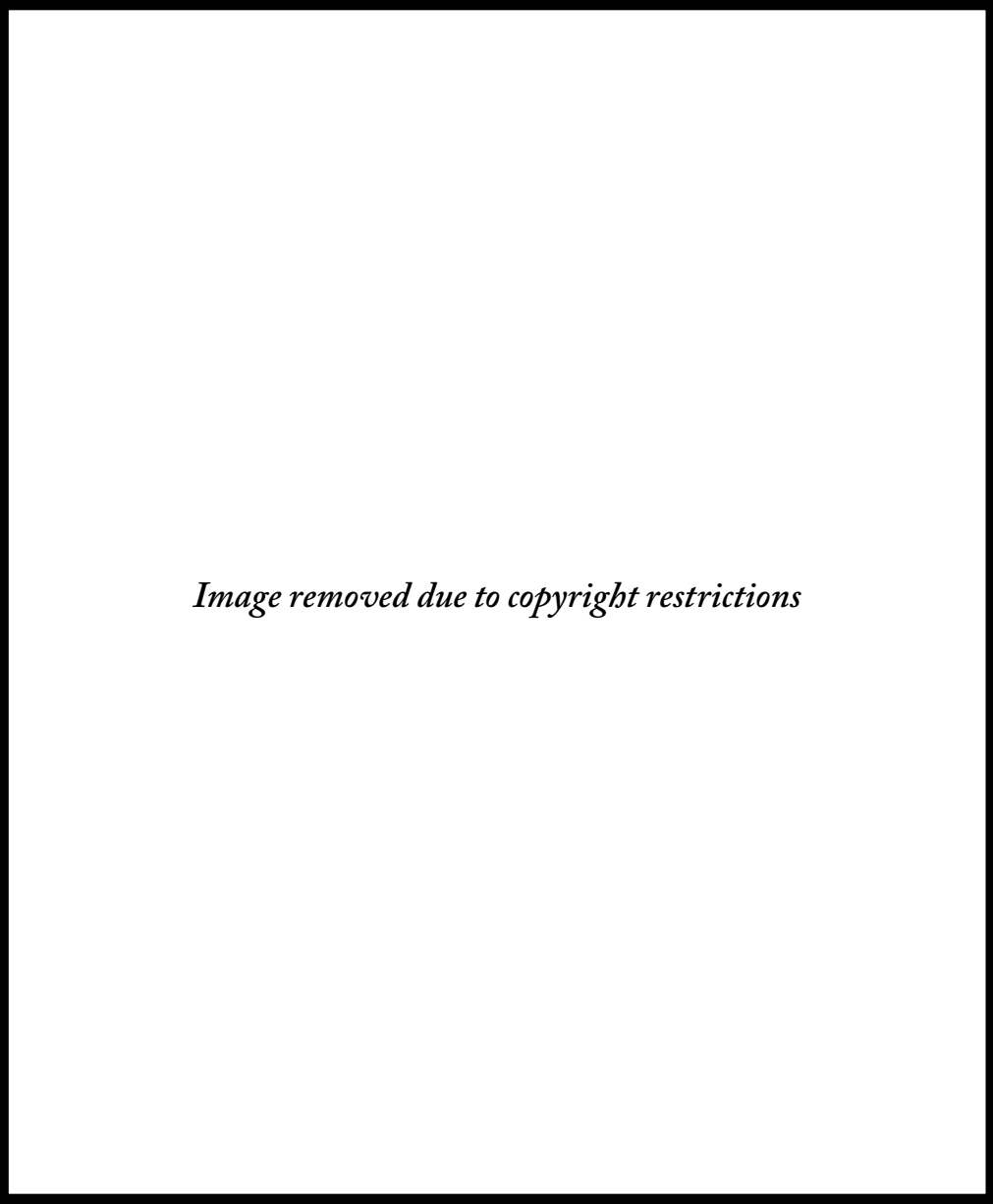


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Figure 21: Robert Morris and Eva Hesse in Risk at Turner Contemporary Margate, 2015

undertaken by artists. As with *Formless*, the materiality of the pieces, and their shared physicality, contingent on fibres, was not explored in the exhibition.

The projects that have sought to explicitly bridge these divisions by acknowledging the multiplicity of textile histories have arisen from within the context of Textile Art, therefore failing to effectively break any boundaries. For instance, in 1995 the sixteenth and final instalment of the Lausanne International Biennial, the original and pre-eminent tapestry biennale, included an exhibition titled *Parallel Histories* that contrasted the methods and materials of post-minimalist, Arte Povera and Joseph Beuys, with Fiber and Tapestry artists. However, the catalogue felt little optimism for lasting change, explaining that this “is a one-sided debate, a craft-sided debate. Only the craft worlds care. The art world is stubborn” (Perrault, 1995:p.120); an opinion still borne out twenty years later.

The volume *Contemporary Textiles: The Fabric of Fine Art* (2008) also sought to understand the ability of some textile-based works to operate with relative ease in the contemporary moment. Editor Pennina Barnett frames her essay with a fragment of a text she wrote for Documenta in 1982 that questions this contradiction within a ‘post-media’ present by asking: “why art after Duchamp easily includes postcards but not tapestries, Xerox but not weaving” (p.36). Although the history presented in her text is intensively detailed, the argument still begins with a singular material history, one that positions Bauhaus weaving on the same continuum as Man Ray’s *L’Enigme* and then details a very idiosyncratic post-war narrative. Unlike Adamson who identifies the distinct “erratic line” of Duchamp, Barnett’s material history makes a close association with painting and surface rather than sculpture and weaving, tracing ideas of the decorative through discussions of the American Pattern and Design movement, the feminist-informed decorative ceramics and paintings of British artists Carol McNicholl and Jacqui Poncelet, before ending on the technological innovations of experimental digital fabrics. The specificity of this account suggests an intriguing but narrow interpretation of textile practices making it difficult to apply to a wider range of contemporary art.

Finally, the 2014 exhibition *Art and Textiles: Fabric as Material and Concept in Modern Art from Klimt to Present*, shown in Stuttgart, presented a curiously truncated narrative of cloth, explaining that:

“[...]textile art continued to be widely written off as a female hobby or women’s housework. In the early 1980s, Rosemarie Trockel took textile art out of this niche with her “knitted paintings” and smoothed the way for a paradigm shift in society’s conceptions. Objects by Gerhard Richter, Yayoi Kusama, Birgit Dieker and Yinka Shonibare – artists who work with textile materials as a matter of course – usher us into the world of contemporary art. The medium has meanwhile apparently been freed from the status of handicrafts once and for all, and is now at artists’ disposal on a par with other ma-

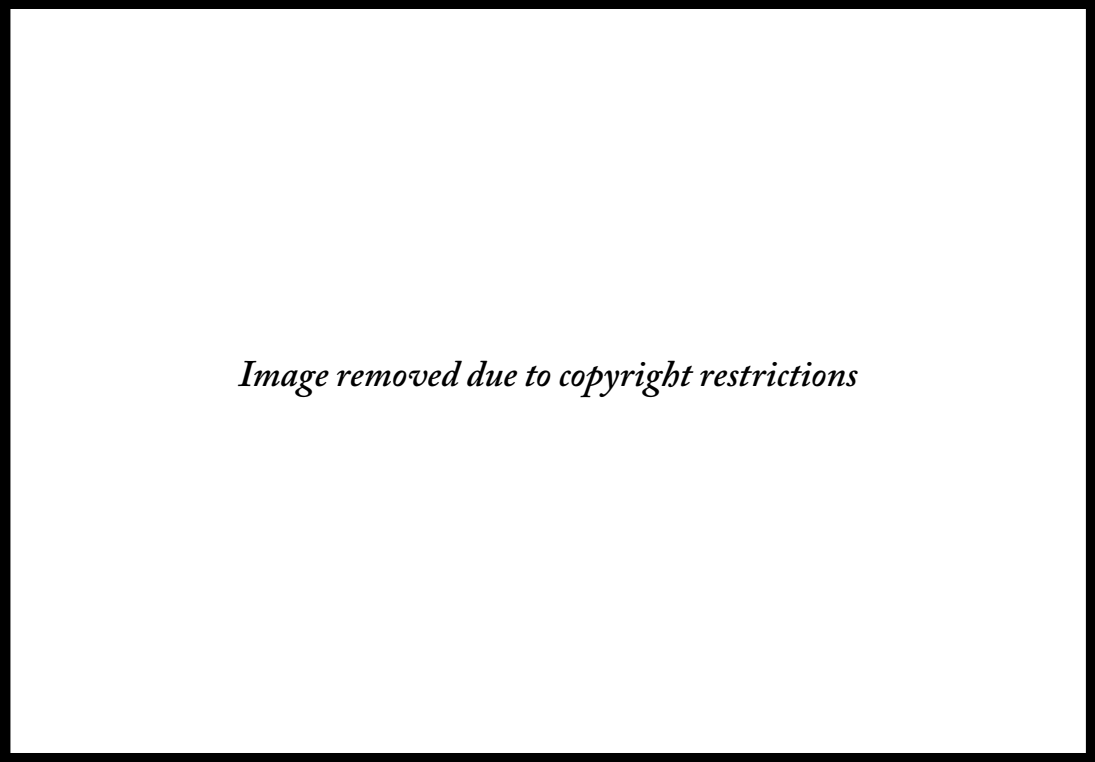


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Figure 22: Louise Bourgeois's work in Art and Textiles, Stuttgart, 2014

terials.” (Staatsgalerie, 2014)

This exhibition demonstrates that a concise early history, and one that focuses on the art canon instead of the Bauhaus, does not equate to a viable history of cloth in contemporary practice. Postulating that the use of cloth by contemporary artists who “[...]work with textile materials as a matter of course”, is due to Trockel’s work alone “smoothing the way” for this “written off” material to be accepted, and “freed” from its lowly previous positioning within handicrafts is a fairly robust feat of historical condensation, even accepting the (unstated, but evident) German focus of this exhibition (Figure 22).

Textile Survey shows can offer an important insight to works and artists who were often overlooked and dismissed through a system that was disinterested in their radical material experiments. But the histories and works presented are partial and can serve to reinforce a dichotomy. They suggest that the barrier is natural; separate yet equal. These shows seek to present a narrative for resolving the complex territories of textiles in modernity and the influence of the Bauhaus, the overlapping and explosive period of the 1960s, and then propose a theoretical framework of acceptance for current “post-media’ textile work. By choosing a single historical account, there is little room for a multitude of textile histories, indicating that the history of fibres within these movements requires more scholarship, not just exhibitions.

Part 5: A Removed Materiality: The Fabric Workshop and Museum

A longitudinal example of the distanced attitude to the materiality of cloth that persists within fine art contexts can be found in Philadelphia’s The Fabric Workshop and Museum. This organisation first began as a community project to introduce silkscreen textile printing to their local communities, inspired by the models of William Morris and Marimekko. As the project developed, artists were brought in on residencies to design yardage, and this has grown into an ambitious residency programme that has hosted some of the most prominent contemporary artists working today.

As the residency programme matured, the emphasis of the projects moved away from printed fabric and increasingly focused on other ways of making work, often venturing in to sculpture and installation. The demographic of the artists also changed from individuals associated with the American Pattern and Design movement, to practitioners who had not previously used fabric at all in their work. This dynamic, of being based in a print workshop, and working with people who are not normally versed in this material, has meant that the particular material properties of cloth are investigated with relative infrequency. Instead, within the compendium of works we see the vast resonances that the material has in our cultural lives; for example, the bespoke punching bags of Glenn Ligon (1995) or the oversized replicas of LAPD uniforms made by Chris Burden (1993). Sometimes the ‘cloth’ is referenced in only fleeting metaphoric terms, sometimes it is interpreted broadly in new media. The Fabric Workshop serves as a space for maximum experimentation, but

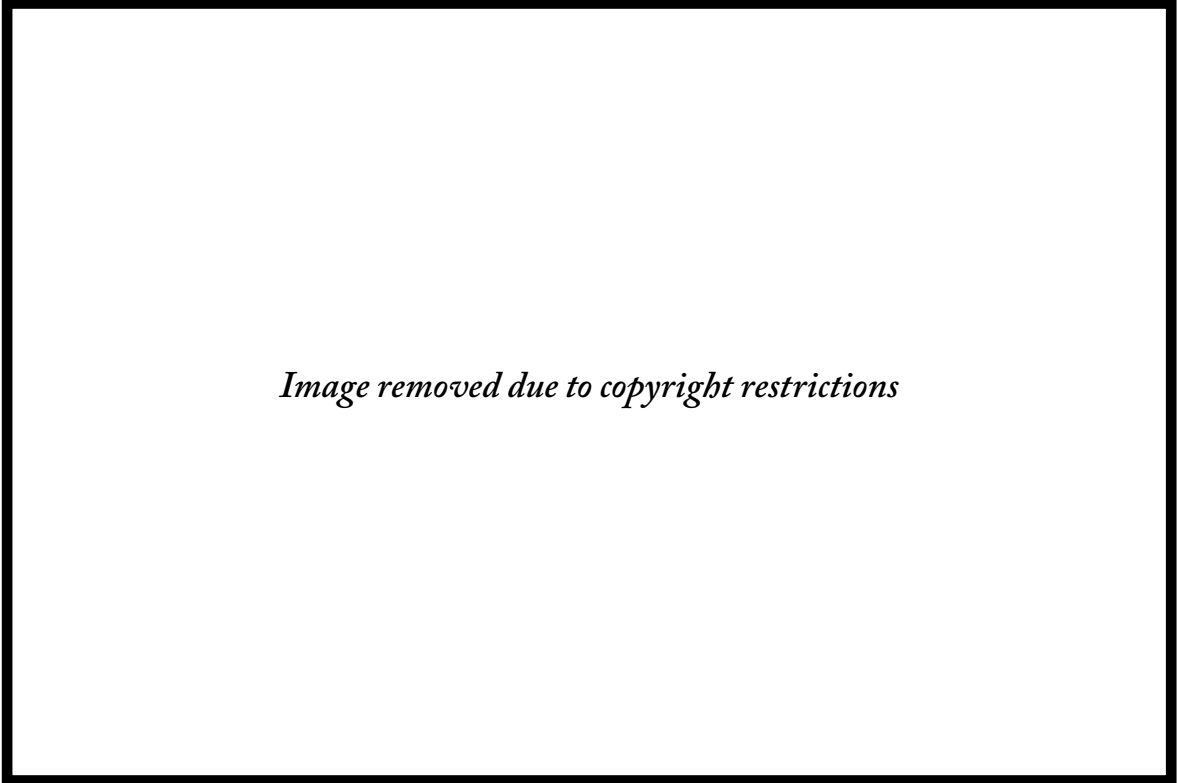


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Figure 23: Mike Kelly, *Riddle of the Sphinx*, 1991. In collaboration with
The Fabric Workshop and Museum

does not emphasise direct experimentation by the artist with cloth itself.

In the lengthy list of artists who have been involved with The Fabric Workshop since its inception, there are relatively few examples of explicitly textile-identified practitioners taking up residencies. If we compare the list of names of their artists-in-residency programme to the list of people included in the ICA's exhibition (selected for its American bias and its ambitious breadth), the only overlaps are Diane Itter and then Lenore Tawney in 1983, years after she had stopped making work on a loom. Artists like Ed Rossbach, Sheila Hicks, Alice Adams have not been involved. The residency was not intended as a site for artist-led experimentation with the production and construction of cloth.

While residencies have been taken up by numerous 'mainstream' artists who use textiles, the works produced often lack the unpredictable and unstable approach to textiles that characterise their practices. Instead it is printed, manufactured, industrially sewn by a team of practitioners, obscuring the haptic, mobile nature of cloth and instead producing technically perfected works. For example, Mike Kelly created large-scale afghan rugs on their computerised knitting machines that have a similar visual language to his previous sculptures of found toys and blankets, but the smooth regularity of the machine-made blankets bears none of the abject traces that characterise those pieces (Figure 23). Similarly, Oldenburg produced a range of small gingham rabbits that are reminiscent of his early soft sculptures, but immaculately cute. Robert Morris created *Restless Sleepers/Atomic Shroud*, a set of crisp bed sheets printed with atomic cloud imagery. Artists who routinely used cloth ended up with taut, slick works that erase the everyday, process, and chance.

The Fabric Workshop captures a myriad of fragments of the use and value of textiles in our contemporary culture, however, by removing the material from the artists' studios and their hands and turning the artist into commissioner, they are failing to connect to the ways in which cloth has been used in sculptural practice over the past decades.

Part 6: The Singular Exceptional Artist: Richard Tuttle and Louise Bourgeois

What happens when a major mainstream artist wishes to overtly discuss their use of textiles within their practice? In 2014 Richard Tuttle presented an ambitious series of projects in collaboration with Tate and Whitechapel, announced in the following manner:

Textiles are commonly associated with craft and fashion, yet woven canvas lies behind many of the world's most acclaimed works of art and textiles are of increasing interest to artists today. I Don't Know, Or The Weave of Textile Language investigates the importance of this material throughout history, across Tuttle's remarkable body of work and into the latest developments in his practice. (Tate, 2008)

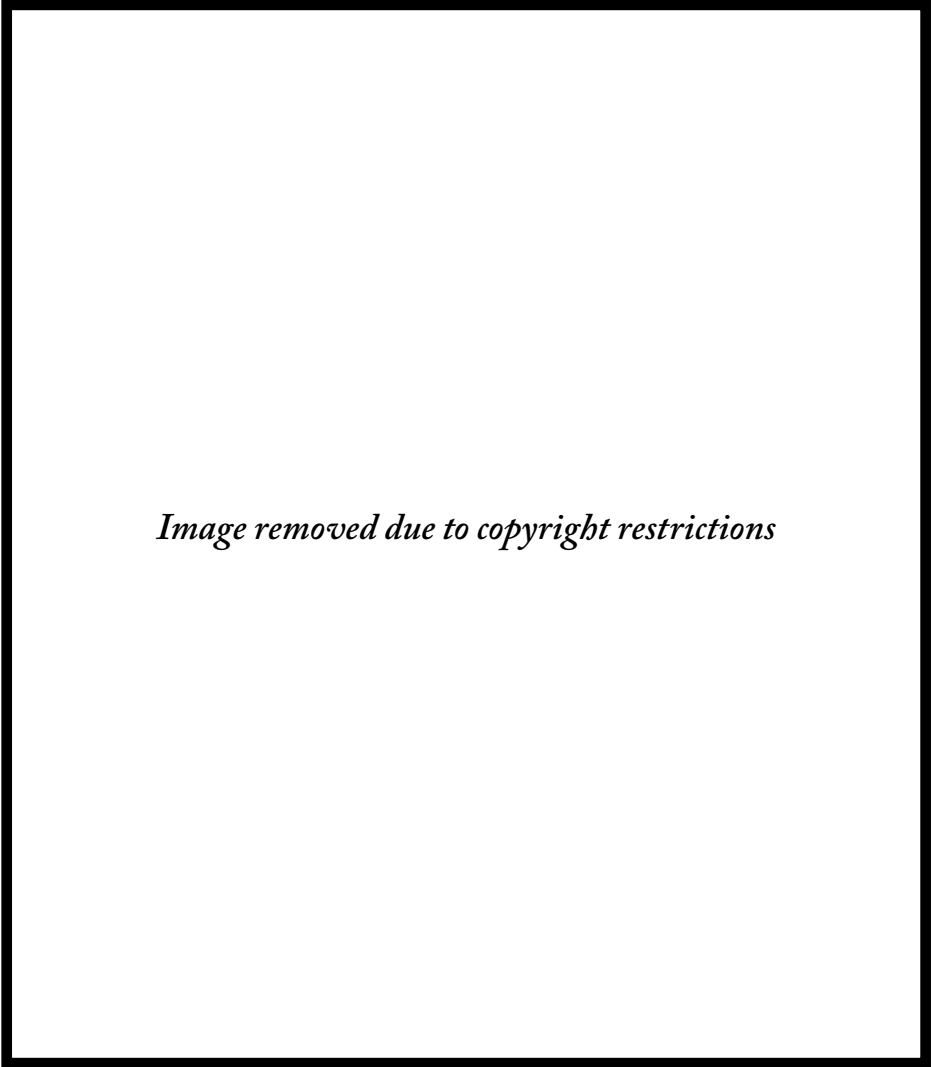


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Figure 24: Richard Tuttle, Ten Kinds of Memory and Memory Itself, 1973.

Within this perplexing passage, Tuttle's work is removed from the context of post-war New York, where his career began, and instead juxtaposes his lengthy cloth experimentations with the "increasing interest of artists today". By not placing Tuttle within a longer material narrative, he is effectively marked out as a unique and original investigator of cloth, perpetuating a fiction that he is an outlier of material experimentation.

While Tuttle can claim a seminal position in post-war American art, the early inception of his practice can also be understood in the context of the 1960s expansion of cloth experimentation where he worked alongside artists like Hicks and Morris. (Figure 24). His work shows a clear link to the territories explored by many of his peers. But while this context is acknowledged, Tuttle does not embrace the history of this cloth lineage – he does not see himself as part of Adamson's tradition. For example, Iwona Blazwick notes "in the late 1950s that artists began to use canvas, not as a support for paint but for its intrinsic qualities" but instead of then moving into a discussion of the widespread cloth experimentation in New York in the following decade, she writes that "Tuttle has been a pioneer in revealing its myriad sculptural qualities – the architecture of the weave, its combination of delicacy and resilience, the fact that it can be hung or laid, the way it absorbs colour and takes up the shape of what it surrounds" (2014:p.70).

The curator Achim Borchardt-Hume contextualises Tuttle's practice using a narrative similar to *Open Textiles*' writing about the "shared history" of textiles and art over the past century "evidenced by the recent explosion of exhibitions on the subject". He explains that:

"[w]hether it be the cross-pollination of textile design and abstraction in the early parts of the twentieth century – from famous Bauhaus weavers such as Anni Albers to artists as diverse as Sonia Delaunay, Natalia Goncharova, Hannah Hoch or Sophie Tauber, to name but a few – or the reflection on the canvas as a 'woven' ground, as in the work of Agnes Martin and Richard Tuttle himself, art and textile have engaged in a long and highly productive dialogue." (2014:p.159)

Further opaque and partial histories of cloth are found in the book that accompanies the shows. Meant as more than a catalogue, the first section of the publication, *Reveal*, juxtaposes fragmentary text taken from a range of textile sources with close-up photographs of samples from Tuttle's extensive collection of world fabrics. The text fragments and images largely operate independently of each other; occasionally the written passage references the type of fabric in the photograph (for example, a passage about the spirituality of Indonesian cloth next to a cloth from Indonesia (2014;p.42)), but in the majority of cases, there is no link.² The texts themselves are largely historical and anthropological in nature, neither drawing from contemporary textile or art theory. Art historical references largely end at Ruskin, and although Larsen is quoted twice, it's from his

2 For instance, a list of '19 families of man-made fibers' is presented beside a printed bark cloth from Fiji (64). Or two quotes about hemp's use in America and Vietnam are presented alongside a piece of cotton, and beside a polyester shirt from Bangladesh, and quotes about ancient Athenian and Navajo weaving (38-39).

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Figure 25: Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled*, tapestry and aluminium, 2002.

publication dating two years before *Wall Hangings*. Modernity and beyond are otherwise absent.

Instead of *revealing* knowledge and information to the reader, this combination of source texts and images presented in this manner obscures specificity and differences amongst these textiles. The fabrics are presented as decontextualized manifestations of otherness that act as source material to the singular and notable Western artist.³

Louise Bourgeois was more circumspect with the cloth experimentations of her later work. Long after her review of *Wall Hangings*, in the final decades of her life, Bourgeois' work became softer as she brought increasing amounts of fabric into her sculptural practice, drawing upon her personal mythology of a childhood spent amongst the mounds of tapestries in the family's workshop for these works (Figure 25).

In the catalogue detailing these works, Germano Celant expounds on the evolution of the material in Bourgeois' practice. Linking it to the personal and the psychological, Celant draws out references to classical sculpture and fashion, in addition to the familial tapestries, in order to account for the soft piles of cloth, the embroidery and the weavings that Bourgeois produced. Similar to Tuttle, her artistic contemporaries and her New York context are not discussed, let alone her earlier critique of *Wall Hangings*, and only the weavings of Albers are referenced. Instead her use of material is presented as profoundly personal and subjective, operating outside any contemporaneous narratives.

These two examples of artists proposing to claim textiles suggest practices that evolved in echo chambers, and practitioners who were unique in their abilities to see the cultural resonances of cloth. To contextualise a material lineage in their practice is not to suggest their work is derivative; it clearly isn't. But the suggestion of material singularity creates a fiction, too, one of cloth pioneers and fabric outliers, rather than individuals working within a context of expansive textile experimentation.

Part 7: The Effects on the Contemporary Mainstream

The effect of these previous exhibitions is that textiles have the illusory property of an under-shown material, not just an under-articulated one. When this is translated to a high-profile commercial setting, the treatment of the material shifts from an art historical silence, to a more damaging

3 This project could be compared to the approach taken by Seth Seigelaub who began as a gallerist dealing in post-war conceptualism, also based in New York, while simultaneously collecting world textiles, but who took a far more scholarly approach to his endeavours. Siegelau used his collection to establish the Center for Social Research on Old Textiles and publish the *Bibliographia Textilia Historiae*, the first catalogue of rare textile texts. In one instance the materials are presented as an idiosyncratic collage, in the latter case, the aim of the collection is to facilitate and enhance study and understanding.

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*Figure 26: Allegro Boehti and antique American quilts, *Losing the Compass*, Whitecube, 2015*

misrepresentation.

Whitecube Mason Yard mounted *Losing the Compass* in 2015, an exhibition that juxtaposed processes of collaboration through showing historical quilts from Amish and African American communities with textile-based works by prominent contemporary artists. Spread over two floors, the quilts were hung formlessly on hooks across one wall of the upstairs room, and overlapped on a set of low risers across the other side. Neither position enabled the close examination of the objects but instead used antique textiles to ape post-minimalist forms. Alongside the quilts were two framed embroidery text works by Allegro Boehetti, framed and hung at eye-level, the gallery signalling where the viewer's focus should be directed (Figure 26).

On the lower level, a number of nominally textile-based works are displayed. With the exception of Mona Hatoum, the artists were all men⁴ and unlike the loose configurations of quilts upstairs, pieces by normally materially transgressive artists like Kelly and Stirling Ruby were stapled to stretchers and pinned to frames. The attempts to show textile works as symbolic of the tensions between the named artist and the anonymous maker was largely frustrated by formatting the work into the most commodified of forms.

Losing the Compass presented contemporary art alongside antiques as if to suggest that the investigation of cloth is a new impulse, as if to deny the influence of quilts, particularly in American art. The word collaborative was used repeatedly, but it was unclear how the collaboration happened, or how it differs from a process of commissioning. In most of the processes, the artist conceptualises the work, and the tradespeople carry it out under their specifications. That the final result might shift from the initial conception does not denote a fully collaborative process as much as the shifting of any object in its manufacturing.

The exhibition sought a texture of textile, a motif of the anonymous labour, and an allusion to a subversive domestic heightened in its transgression by the almost entirely male roster, yet it betrayed its commercial gallery environment by never committing to the ethical and political difficulties actually embedded in these works.

Hauser Wirth and Schimmel, ranked as the most powerful art organisation globally in the 2015 Art Power list, opened their new Los Angeles gallery in early 2016 with the exhibition *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women 1947 - 2016*. This exhibition featured artists who fell on both sides of the 'art' and fibre or tapestry boundary, but instead of explicitly discussing these tensions of the post-war period, a curiously smooth retrospective history was presented. In the long introduction to the show, the paragraph that contextualises the works of the 1960s and 70s is of particular note:

4 *Losing the Compass* was not only predominantly male, but curiously omitted artists like Tracey Emin and Liza Lou who are both represented by Whitecube and whose practices engage directly with cloth (and in the case of Lou, collaborative making).

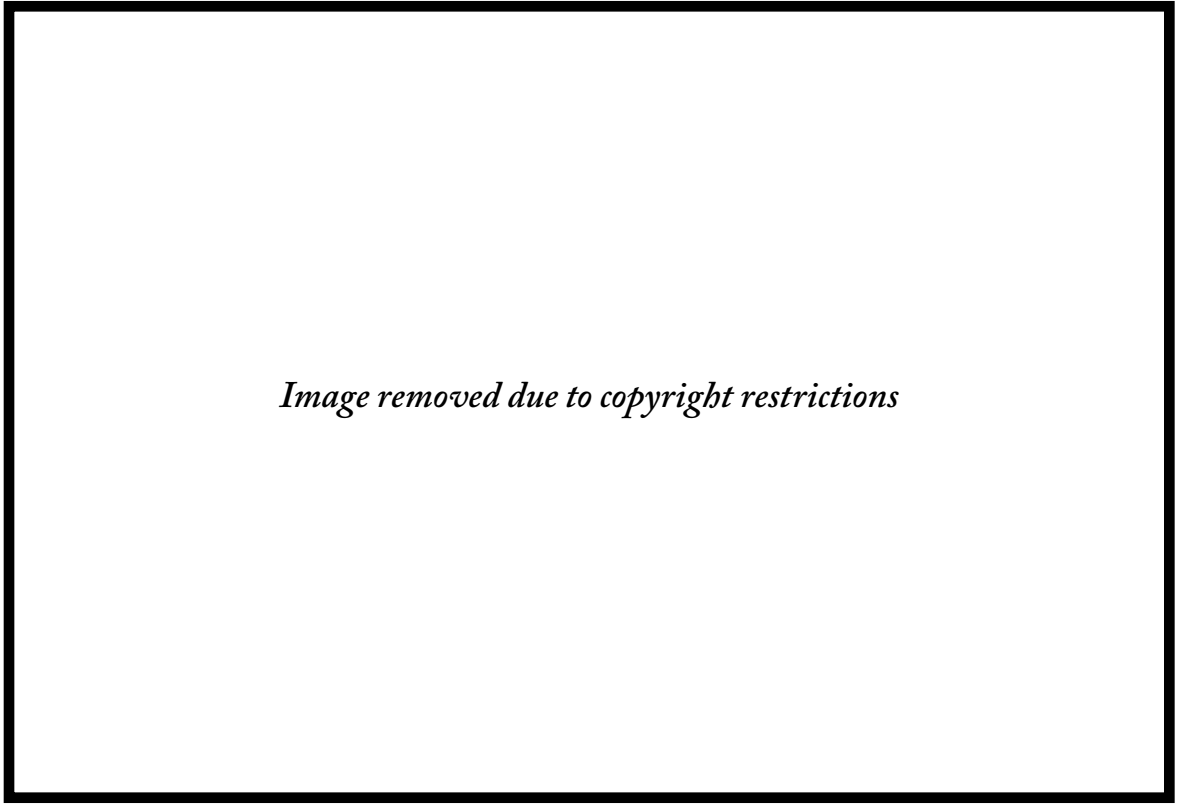


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*Figure 27: Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Wheel with Rope*, 1973, installation view of *Revolution in the Making*, Hauser Wirth and Schimmel, Los Angeles, 2015*

Revolution in the Making continues with the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, and includes works by Magdalena Abakanowicz, Lynda Benglis, Heidi Bucher, Gego, Françoise Grossen, Eva Hesse, Sheila Hicks, Yayoi Kusama, Mira Schendel, Michelle Stuart, Hannah Wilke, and Jackie Winsor – Post-Minimalist artists who ignited a revolution in their use of process-oriented materials and methods. Instead of vehicles of meaning, these sculptors produced forms that celebrate techniques of making and a one-to-one relationship with materials within the private sphere of the studio. Sculptures in this section of the exhibition evidence a strong sense of materiality through stacking, layering, cutting, draping, rubbing, gouging, and other tactile processes as means of conveying presence and a sense of their makers' being-in-the-world. These works are characterized by striking – and, ultimately, enduringly influential – formal innovations, including the appropriation of unconventional industrial materials like latex and rope, organic and natural materials like saplings and earth, and ephemeral materials like wax and paper. (Hauser Wirth and Schimmel, 2016)

While the particularities embodied in the practices of these artists may be further elucidated in the catalogue, this summary is troubling in a number of regards. Firstly, that the gallery has retrospectively categorised these artists as “post-minimalist”, a term which normally denotes quite a specific and American group of artists,⁵ feels jarring. While batching an artist like Yayoi Kusama under this term feels like an inaccurate description given the maximalist, immersive and international character of her practice. Including Abakanowicz, Hicks or Grossen who, as Auther demonstrates in her text, were actively excluded from this art category, is far more problematic. While also shoring up the notion that process-informed works are not also “vehicles of meaning”, the tensions and distinctions of this heterogeneous list are glossed over. Instead the named materials are the more acceptably canonical and specific “latex” and “rope”. There is talk of softening and piling.

“Cloth” and “textile” or “fiber” are words that are omitted from the text, both in regards to historical movements and in the descriptions of the works. However, artists from the contemporary period including Karla Black and Shinique Smith (Figure 28) are credited in creating works “that embrace domestic materials and craft as embedded discourse, boldly eliminating material hierarchies” and that the lineage of the work is apparent through the “amalgam of influences from the women artists who came before: the knotting, weaving piling, and slumping of earlier eras have expanded into forest-like installations redolent of contemporary urban experience” (Hauser Wirth and Schimmel, 2016).

⁵ The term ‘post-minimalism’ was coined by New York-based art historian Robert Pincus-Witten in 1971 to describe artists informed by minimalism, but who were introducing elements such as haptic processes, non-industrial fabrication methods, performance and site-specificity into their inquiries into abstraction and repetition. While it is possible to identify these traits in a myriad of global practices from the 1960s onwards, in an art historical context it most accurately describes a (still heterogeneous) group of artists based in New York City who were actively responding to the strictures of minimalism and that typically includes individuals such as Eva Hesse, Keith Sonnier, Richard Tuttle, Robert Morris and Vito Acconci.

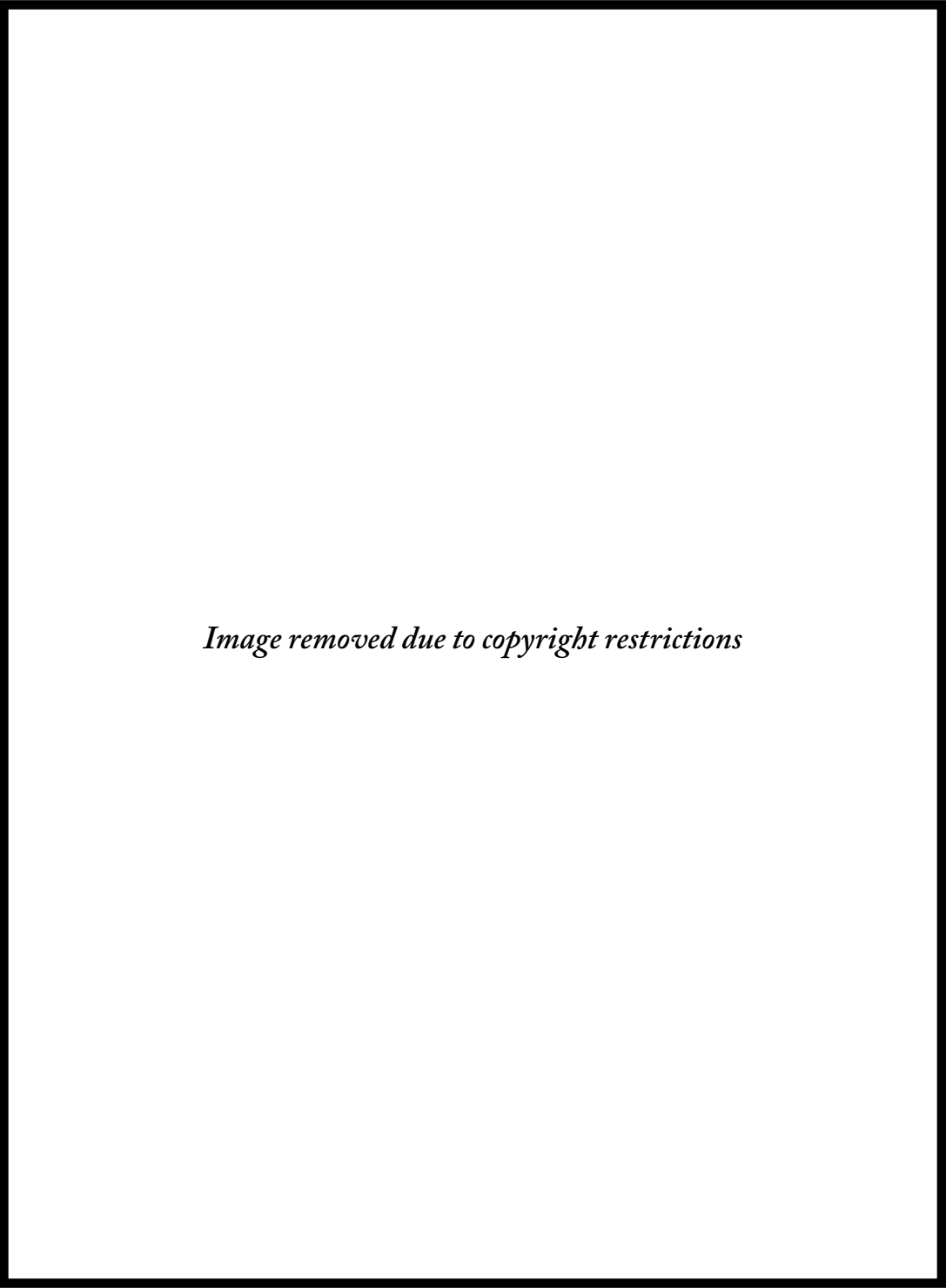


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Figure 28: Shinique Smith, *Forgiving Strands*, installation view of *Revolution in the Making*, Hauser Wirth and Schimmel, Los Angeles, 2015

By not making direct material and methodological connections between the earlier works and the practices of today, the cloth lineage is once again denied. Practices like Black's, while undoubtedly informed by feminist art practices and discourse, are not *also* considered in the broader discourse of process experimentation in twentieth century practice. And conveniently, the art establishment does not need to contend with the legacy of a dogmatic art/craft rift.

Conclusions

Reviewing these texts and exhibitions reaffirms the necessity of this project to pick up Adamson's casually thrown gauntlet and tease out the "erratic but nonetheless perceptible line" of collapsed cloth and loose threads in sculptural practice.

The history of cloth in sculptural practices has been marred by a language that is at once too specific and too general; the denigration and rediscovery of mid-century fibre works is recounted in explicit terms, and the use of cloth in canonical works is mentioned in quiet asides. From the late-sixties until the present moment, there have been texts and exhibitions that attempt to bring textiles in from the icy peripheries of accepted artistic practice. Simultaneously, some artists have always been able to situate themselves within an art canon by carefully describing their textile-based works through specific physical attributes, by avoiding overt references to women and the domestic,⁶ and by suggesting that their use of cloth is a relatively unique affectation; separate from the contemporaneous material investigations of their formative years.

There is a dangerous assumption embedded within these narratives, one that suggests that the material history of cloth within canonical art is understood and does not require direct and overt articulation. It perpetuates a condition where fabric and textiles are equated with a narrow range of (often gendered) practices, and an amnesiac loop is formed that prevents contemporary works from being understood within a context that includes Duchamp and Morris as much as it might include antique quilts and the Fiber Movement.

6 At least, in the case of Bourgeois, until they are well and truly entrenched in the pantheon.



Figure 29: Breeze Block Pile I in progress

Another Day

I've given myself a writing deadline of 1400 words by the end of the day, but the project sits on my desk inertly seducing me. I can't hand over my alert morning hours to it; those need to be funnelled into writing otherwise no good writing will happen at all.

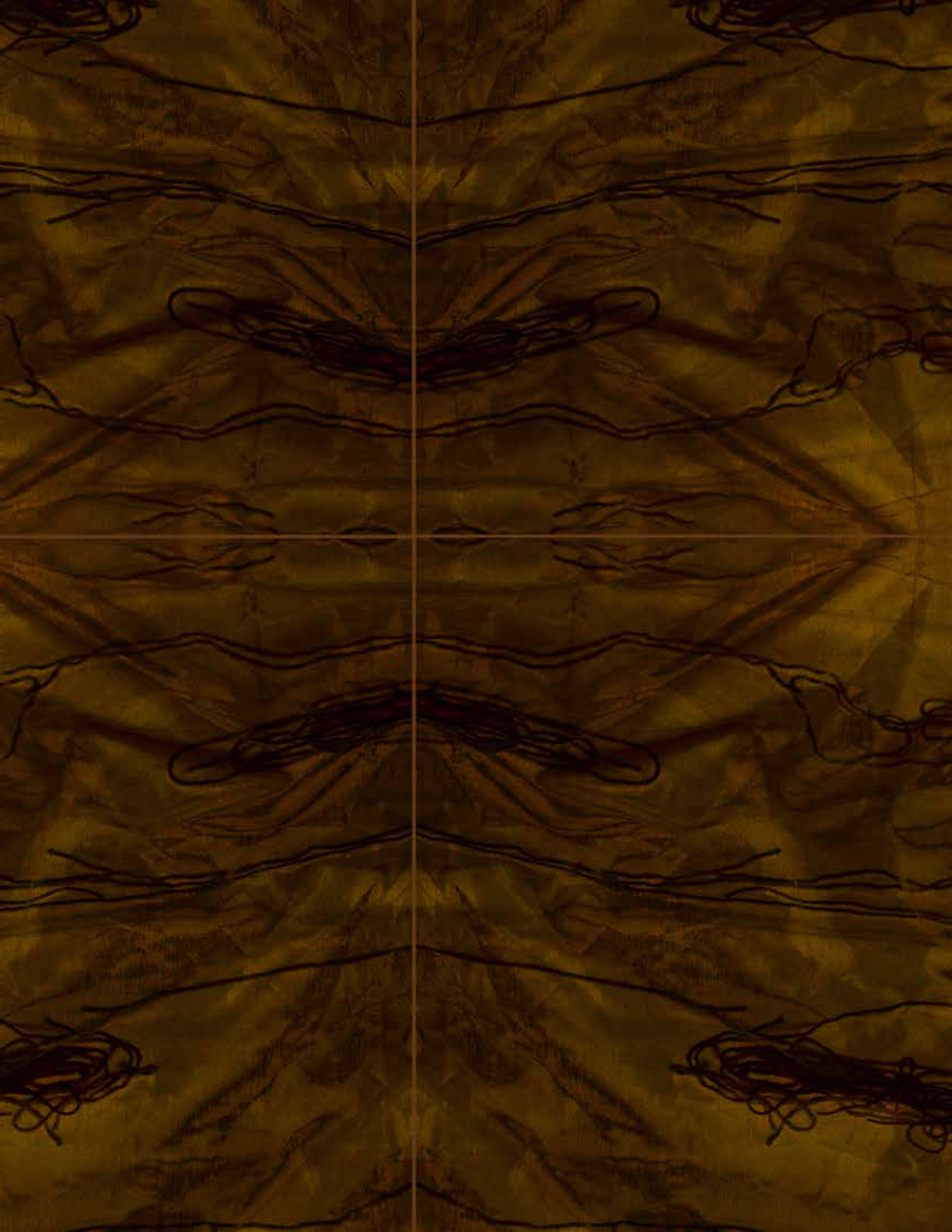
But the project is in such an easy phase. I'm not bored yet of passing the yarn through the plastic, my little wire tool is still holding up, my hands aren't sore or stiff, and as the worked section is still relatively small, less than a quarter of one repeat, every new knot feels transformative. Three repeats from now, or six, this sensation will dull.

I have to leave this part of my document so I don't think about it anymore. At least not until the late afternoon when all new thoughts have left my head, and I can just carry on with the project.

The project has to be removed from my desk and hidden. Thrown behind me, out of sight.



Methodology



Methodology

One needs a point of view. Can that be one of chaos?

- Eva Hesse, *Eva Hesse*

Part 1 - Introduction

Given the range of possible approaches, the complexities in conducting a contextual review, the uneasiness that is felt about quantifying the “practice-led” component of the work, and the difficulties in balancing writing with making, it feels necessary to provide a map of how these competing stresses were managed within the context of a practice-led PhD.

As the project evolved, the extent to which my research was informed by my practice became clear, and also how my engagement with textiles and the processes of making did in fact, lead my research. This chapter therefore both serves as a key to the theoretical and material research processes and an account of how the territory of investigation itself shifted dramatically from the initial project proposal to the current document and corresponding body of studio work.

Part 2 - The Changing Research Question

My initial PhD proposal asked the question: “What is the potential for textiles to structurally and metaphorically describe the built environment?” This area of inquiry was rooted in the work I had been making in the studio in the time leading up to the PhD, pieces that translated the forms of the built environment into cloth, and then used photography as a means of documenting a constant repositioning and reconfiguration of the objects (Figure 30).

In order to demonstrate the dynamics at play in this field of inquiry, I created a knowingly simplistic illustration of the assumptions and associations that would affect the research; linking the domestic, textiles, and women on one end of the spectrum, and the masculine domain of concrete forms and urban spaces at the other (Figure 31). While it obscures subtleties between these categories, it served as a succinct illustration of the tensions in my practice. How were these binaries affected by turning buildings into cloth, forms that lacked structural integrity? What happened when structures that appeared immutable and permanent were translated into something flexible and slumping? And, as a corollary, why do we so often speak of the built environment in textile metaphors? These urban fabrics that fray and are knit back together? Why does our idea of cloth capture this process of physical and social rupture and repair so effectively?

This research should have been possible in an ostensibly post-media era. However, just as Pennina



Figure 30: The kind of house I could build us, 2011

Barnett predicted when she asked about Duchamp and Xeroxes, I was perpetually running into the “craft” and “textile” conflation; overt mentions of cloth led to a one-dimensional reading of the material, and a creaky idea of femininity and domesticity. Or, conversely, more nuanced sources of textile theory did not address its usage in sculptural practices. As the previous chapter discusses, I couldn’t find a clear account of the material properties of cloth that I was exploiting in my objects. A context where everything is permissible does not equate to a context where we have the lexicon needed to explore this vast material potentiality.

At the beginning of my PhD, I was largely unaware that there might be gaps in the literature of textiles and sculpture, and that it would therefore be challenging to develop my line of investigation. But as these sources continually failed to appear, my first writings were subsumed with clarifying this territory instead of addressing my question, and this writing began to feel more fundamental than my first research question. I experienced anger, frustration, and lingering feelings of intellectual disquiet with the partial narratives I encountered. As a result of the difficulties of this initial literature search, my research question changed to its current formulation: *How have textiles been used by artists to describe ideas of structural, spatial and temporal instability in the twentieth century?* The research of my first year illuminated the extent of the anxieties within sculptural practice when it collides with explicit narratives of cloth.

Alongside my continued research, writing, and studio practice, I sought to test out this new area of investigation with wider audiences by speaking at a range of conferences and symposia, particularly in my second year. I presented to a post-grad Modernist Studies conference, I showed my soft and fragmentary practice to AHRC-funded researchers who were thinking about the place of ruins in cities. I talked about textiles and sculpture and missing lexicons to students, some of whom came up to me after to commiserate about the ongoing difficulties of using cloth in their own art practices. I showed a poster at a practice-led research symposium, I presented at two conferences investigating emerging Material Culture.¹

These presentations elicited questions:

Why hadn’t I mentioned Picasso’s chair caning?

Why was I preoccupied with the art and craft hierarchies? Could we not just all move on now?

What did I really think of Richard Tuttle’s shows at Whitechapel and Tate Modern?

What did I mean by sculpture?

I stumbled when I answered almost all of them, and then thought through them, adjusting and modifying my writing in response. I presented at the last conference in November 2015, and after that year of intensive presentations, I retreated into silence punctuated by dialogues with my supervisory team.

¹ A full record of all conference presentations and artist talks can be found in Appendix A of this document.

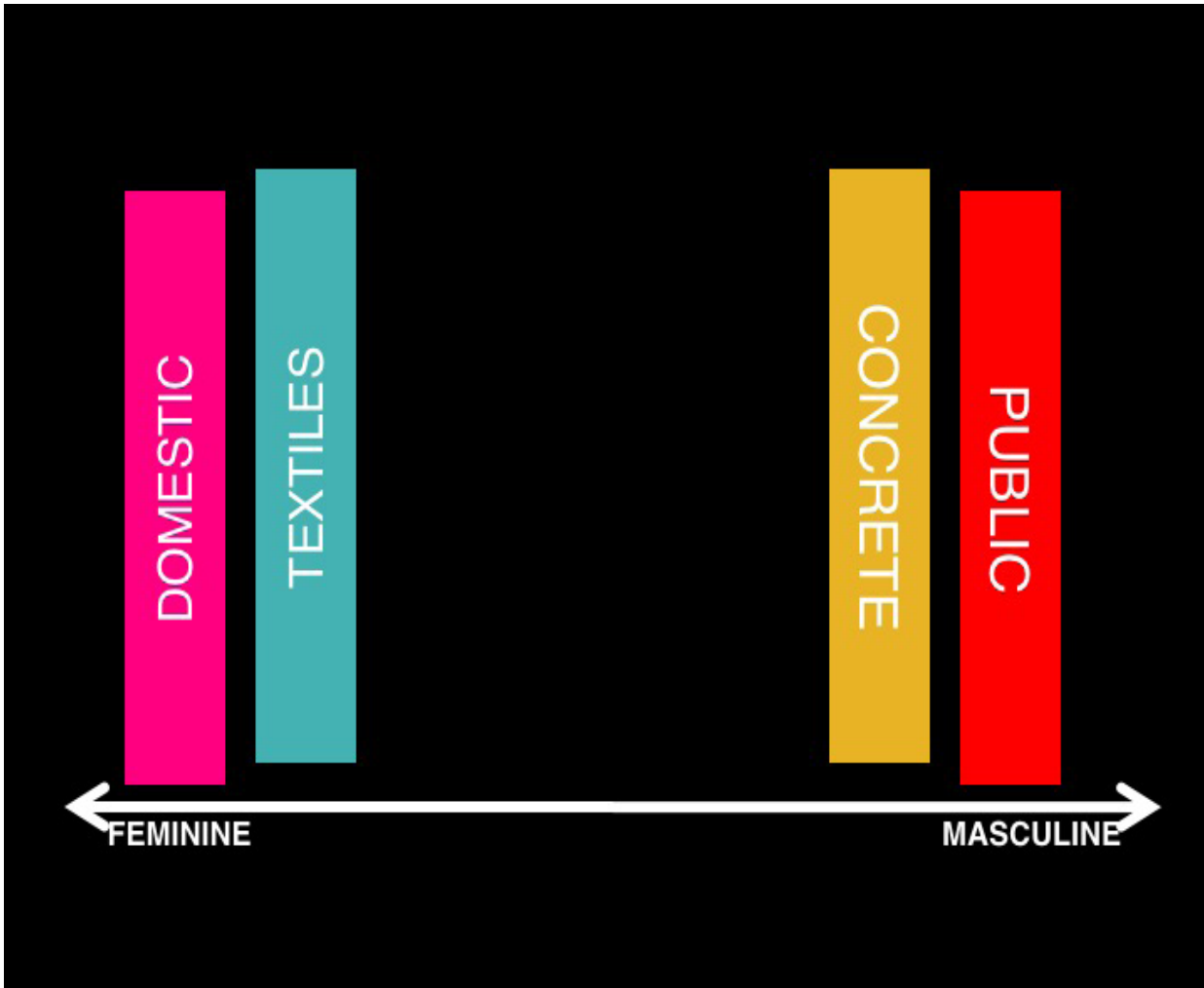


Figure 31: Diagram of genders, materials and public and private spaces

In addition to shifting the territory of my written dissertation, this new question prompted a more fundamental investigation of the mechanisms at play in my studio practice. While my work had, and largely continues to be, interested in the forms of the built environment, this crystallised question both expanded the possible fields of inquiry beyond the forms of the city, but also asked me to think about the basic mechanisms exploited in my forms, the minute meanings embedded in their slumping postures. In response, my work simplified and focused on these gestural movements and a relationship between a tight focal point of order, and a wider abstracted space of chaos and mutability.

Part 3 - Research

The research component of a practice-led PhD will almost by necessity be idiosyncratic given the few mechanisms or search criteria that can robustly establish the relevant works of art. In formal literature review terminology, the most analogous process is “handsearching”, physically going through journal articles, not relying on the search results of databases alone. This is a slow approach, and in a practice-led context, one that cannot claim to be comprehensive. It relies on chance and an openness to potential materials.

I have asked the same initial questions of all works of art encountered over the past three years; is there cloth? And if there is, what can it teach me? Michelle Grabner presented a useful version of this methodology when she curated the Whitney Biennale in 2014. As an educator and artist, as well as a curator, she adopted a pedagogical approach; she chose artists who taught her something, whom she felt had the potential to also teach the audience (p.260).

When I’ve encountered works that are reliant on fabric, I’ve asked:

What does this tell me about cloth?

Why has cloth been used?

Who made the cloth?

What does it tell me in addition to and apart from cloth?

As I continued this process of encountering by handsearching galleries, journals, books, the internet, as people suggested artists and projects, as I slowly categorise pieces into case studies, identifying commonalities, or a shared language, I’ve tested them against these questions to determine their inclusion or exclusion within this text.

If *3 Standard Stoppages* is considered within this rubric, the following answers are generated:

- 1) It tells me that string has multiple positions, that these are subject to chance and gravity
- 2) It was likely to hand in the studio, it was the simplest and most flexible material that



Figure 32: Textile sketch, 2014. An example of studio work undertaken during this research process.

- could fall autonomously and make a mark independent of the artist
- 3) The string was industrially made, not made by the artist
 - 4) The work is an idiosyncratic system reliant on the unpredictable nature of string to exemplify the development of a personal and encoded system of measurements

Early on, I wondered if Sonia Delaunay's *Couverture* should perhaps be the first textile-based work in my timeline, just pre-dating *3 Standard Stoppages* by two years. There was an undeniable lure of beginning with a less well-known work, and one made by a woman, and avoiding anointing Duchamp once again as the instigator.

Considering this work in relation to the questions:

- 1) Cloth can be cut and stitched into arrangements that were aligned with the developing modernist formalism of the period.
- 2) The fabric was used initially for functional reasons; the work began as an actual blanket (*couverture*) for Delaunay's infant son.
- 3) The cloth was industrially made and then stitched together by the artist, her stitches quite visible, the hand of the artist very present
- 4) This is a retrospective work of art; Delaunay declared it a cubist painting after it had been used as a functional object.

That Delaunay reclaimed this work from its functional status and declared it a Cubist painting makes it intriguing, but for my own particular project, it does not make it educational. The piece went from the mobile, shifting body of a small child, and made into "art" when it was framed and affixed to the wall. This denial of its instability privileges the surface; just as Delaunay intended, it makes it a painting. In these two works, Duchamp and Delaunay point to very different material properties.

This process is repeated for each of the works discussed in this text, and particularly in the three case studies. In a sense it is a more overt and intentional version of the methodology I have always had as an artist, looking at the works of others, seeing what I can learn.

Once these works were ordered into their loose groupings, the "literature" part of a review becomes more straightforward. One can read around specific works, and the texts themselves offered new works to consider. Gratifyingly, partial but nevertheless evident traces of the narrative I was developing did present themselves in the literature; fragments of the history, of Adamson's erratic line, routinely presented themselves made appearances.

As well as selecting works that would contribute to fleshing out of the history of unstable cloth, I've largely selected works from the Western art canon. This is a deliberate decision to demonstrate



Figure 33: Textile sketch, 2014. An example of studio work undertaken during this research process.

material methodologies that are hidden in plain sight. The exploitation of cloth is ubiquitous and prevalent, and not the preserve of women. While there are particular and potent feminist narratives that have been effectively communicated through the use of cloth in contemporary practice, the reach of the material extends beyond those stories. All humans encounter textiles through prolonged and primal exposure, and as the possible range of sculptural materials expanded in the twentieth century, it follows that there would be a corresponding proliferation of fibre-based experimentation. Contemporary examples in this text have a broader international profile. My ability to include them within this narrative reflects on the ability of artists from Asia, Africa and the Middle East to operate within the centres of contemporary art rather than my own particular expertise in global practices.

In *Artists with PhDs*, James Elkins frets over artists being exposed to too much art historical knowledge, postulating that an influx of information could be detrimental to production and quality, creating work that is illustrative and didactic (2009:p.148). His arguments tend to assume a one-way flow of information, namely that artists will translate source material into our works, and that a research-led practice of an artist, and the text produced, will not trouble the existing art historical narratives. He writes:

Writing that proceeds by examples, building old arguments using new materials, is an interesting way forward: provided, I think, that it does not present itself as a contribution to theory – because then the eccentric range of references, and the absence of crucial sources, the interest in performativity and practice over the construction of durable theories, would again put such writing at the margins of academic interest.
(2009:p.123)

This attitude both undercuts the knowledge and authority we bring to our territories and assumes that we have reliable “crucial sources” to begin with. Elkins suggests that an artist’s decision to include unconventional or wide-ranging materials is a personal eccentricity borne out of poor research methodology rather than a necessary reaction to an uncharted and underwritten territory.

In the audience of the practice-led symposium I attended in 2015 was a sociologist who, after listening to our anxious concerns about the validity of practice-led research, explained to the attendees with measured exasperation that her discipline had resolved these issues decades ago through the development of auto-ethnography. A process that both encourages the researcher themselves to identify their own bias, but in the case of ‘native autoethnography’, also accepts that the individuals of a community have information not easily gleaned from an outside perspective and should be encouraged to record it directly. Crucially, it is also distinct from autobiography by its criticality: “auto-ethnography shares the storytelling feature with other genres of self-narrative but transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation” (Chang 2008:p.43).

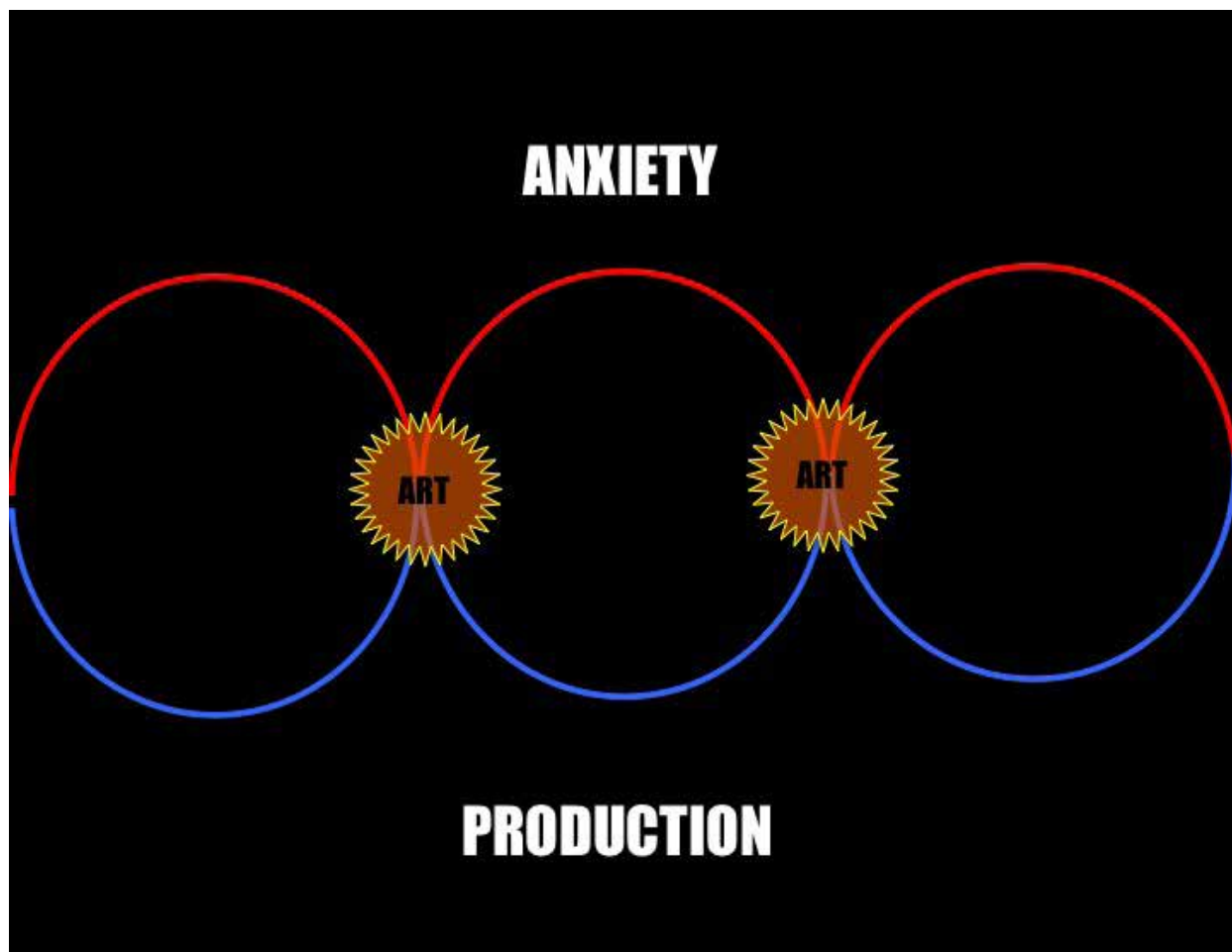


Figure 34: Diagram of Anxiety, Production and Creative Resolution, 2015

While auto-ethnography within the social sciences may be a more controversial method than my fellow symposium attendee indicated (Denshire 2014), the parallels feel apt; as a practitioner, I bring specific tacit knowledge and years of experience that informs my understanding of how and why artists use cloth, but additionally, I'm also asking different questions from historians or theorists, questions that have received scant or superficial attention. Through the vantage point of praxis, the omissions and assumptions presented in the art historical accounts of textiles can be challenged through direct experience. My material commitment to cloth means that I'm invested in a robust and useful narrative, and a full lexicon of serviceable terminology.

Part 4 – Practice

The formative years of my practice initially mimicked the entrenched boundaries of post-war art; divided between art practiced in an educational setting and 'craft' activities carried out at home. My introduction to string and wool happened around the same time that I started to have severe anxiety attacks as a teenager. These attacks left me feeling paralysed, unable move for hours on end. When a friend taught me how to knit, I discovered two things; I innately understood how the wool and needles should work together; I had an aptitude, and it unblocked my anxious paralysis. These small, repetitive movements were just enough activity to quell my panic and kick-start the rest of my body back into motion. Each stitch was a micro-reconciliation between my fearful terror and a clearer, objective, reality. This activity was a helpful therapeutic process, but also, without intention, I simultaneously built up a tacit knowledge of these fibrous materials.

Over time, I started to tentatively integrate textiles into my sculptural practice, much to the consternation of my undergraduate lecturers, and despite them, cloth became a potent, generative way for me to make work. All of the material knowledge that I had amassed was beginning to find a conceptual context, and I was drawn to the non-canonical nature of cloth; its ability to convey feminist narratives of domesticity and overlooked labour.

Many years later, I no longer routinely experience these kinds of attacks, however my studio production still works to an anxious rhythm and catastrophic thoughts; fears that are best assuaged through steady and repetitive work. Mapped out, the process could resemble Figure 34. The red line charting my anxiety and the blue line my production. As the production goes up, the anxiety resolves itself. I know when an object is done, when a work is complete, when the anxiety and the production cancel each other out and there is a moment of calm and clarity. A cool recognition of a satisfying meeting of physical properties and concept. Or as Rosemarie Trockel has said: "The minute something works, it ceases to be interesting. As soon as you have spelled something out, you should set it aside." (2015). My anxiety is a kind of interest in the object, a sharp and nervous monitoring of its development, and as it resolves itself, and the anxiety wanes, so too does my



Figure 35: Mock Tudor Tent, as part of TRANSFIXTURE, Glasgow Project Room, 2014

interest.

Liza McCosh writes about this process as looking for Edmund Burke's sublime, defined as "tranquillity tinged with terror":

Apprehension felt in the developmental stages of creativity, [...] often precedes what I sense as a sublime sensation. [...] I don't always understand where my actions will lead or what results will be achieved when particular materials interact. At times mishaps may occur [...] leaving me with an uncomfortable feeling. This experience is not grounded in terror but is accompanied by a distinct feeling of apprehension. However, when new ideas, understandings of painterly effects emerge from this process, I feel a sensation of delight and wonderment just as Burke describes." (2013:p. 129)

By opening up my practice fully to the apprehension described by McCosh, or what I recognise as anxiety, and pushing through those uncomfortable sensations, my practice develops in ways that I cannot always predict, and the work produced during the PhD took on markedly different characteristics in each of the three years of the process.

During my first year, I was heavily involved in preparing for projects initiated before the start of the programme including a two-person show at Glasgow's Project Room, and a project with Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop. Aligned to my initial research question, the Glasgow exhibition was constructed around *Mock Tudor Tent*, a piece that replicated the façade of a mock-tudor home and folded it into a simplified tent structure (Figure 35). The work for Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop continued exploring themes of shelter with the bookwork and video project, *Questions to Ask Yourself Before Building your First House* (Figure 36). Having recently moved to an anonymous suburban neighbourhood in Kent, this work developed from the anxieties of relocation and seeking shelter, and used textiles to attempt to understand the bizarre history of my local park that had been the site of a plague pit, Nazi plane crash, one of Dickens' favourite walking routes, and also a post-war suburb torn down and reverted to parkland.

The second year of study felt experimental, scattered and unfinished as the direction of my research changed and I was cut loose from the constraints of the built environment. At the same time, I moved again, this time to a more rural location, just beside the North Kent Downs, removed from the urban environments from which I always drew inspiration. Simultaneously, the refugee crisis became increasingly dire, and particularly living at the edges of England, close to Calais, my explorations of tents began to feel shallow. While there would have been ways of resolving this discomfort, it did not feel like something I could pursue while undertaking this particular PhD. Such a potent and difficult territory needed more dedicated and careful time than I could accord to it.

Instead, I began projects and put them aside. I collaborated in two projects and found the experi-



Figure 36: Questions to ask yourself before building your first house, video and book installation, Edinburgh Sculpture Workshops, 2014

ences stimulating and collegial, but not productive or generative for my own practice (Figure 37). As these projects began with external starting points; a consideration of a site, a discussion of a text, and not through materials, my own contributions felt superficial. Collaborations begin with discourse, and my work begins with materials.

Towards the end of my second year, I developed the methods for *Breeze Block Pile I* and *II*, the work forming my final studio submission and taking over my last year of study. Comprised of lengths of yarn knotted into cut sheets of plastic canvas, these works are the result of earlier experimentation with making rugs with very long and droopy piles. Imagining Elaine Riechek's floppy tents hanging loosely from the walls, these objects managed to synthesise something elusive; a state at once fixed and unfixed, an area of focus and an area of chaos.

This was not the first time I had used rug-making techniques; my final undergraduate project had been a funeral mound composed of stones covered in handmade rugs; a work referencing the traditional burial practices and the hobby of my Jewish grandmother who had died the year before.

Unlike that project, I did not have a clear outcome in mind for these works. While my previous pedagogical experiences had instilled a language-driven approach to making where a verbal thesis was enacted through materials, that process proved too stifling. A couple of years after finishing my MA, in the middle of an acute health crisis, this methodology broke apart. In order to work through this fraught period, (and although I contemplated not making work at all, that was a far more troubling prospect), I decided to consciously exclude language from the studio. My works were no longer reified sentences enacted through materials, but material experimentations in and of themselves.

Working in this manner freed up my production and released me from a process of following through a predetermined activity. Perhaps every artist needs to define their own proximities of language and practice. Frances Morris recounts the development of Phyllida Barlow's attitude to the prevalence of language-based works in the early years of her career in contrast to her own approach: "Strategies of dematerialisation helped her to respond, in her own work, to immaterial aspects of art making – light, air, time and smell – and conceptual art's emphasis on process and contingency were key to her developing aesthetic. However, Barlow found the reduction of art to text and image as profoundly limiting. She particularly disliked "work where the idea is important about everything else, and what is offered visually can only be processed through the verbal understanding of the idea" (2015:p.58). I also need to hold language at a distance, to not anticipate how something might develop, to work within the narrative of materials themselves.

Breeze Block Pile I and *II* are not entirely original in their construction. They of course draw upon rug-making techniques, and inadvertently, those used by Hesse in some of her sculptures. Lippard recounts Hesse's first description of making a sculptural object during her residency in Germany:



Figure 37: Collaborative Poster from *Vulnerable Sharing Club*, 2015

I finally took a screen, heavy mesh which is stretched on a frame like so and taken cord which I cut into smaller pieces. I soak them in plaster and knot each piece through a hole and around a wire. It is compulsive work which I enjoy. If it is really a new idea it would be terrific. But it is not. However I have plans with other structures and working more with plaster. It might work its way to something special. (Hesse quoted in Lippard 1992:p.29. Italics original to the source)

By substituting a few words, this passage could be a diary entry from my own, smaller, first experiment with wool and plastic canvas. The underlying impulse is echoed; an unknowing, but hopeful undertaking; a feeling that this improvised series of actions could lead to something novel. Hesse did not keep this initial work, and there are no photographs in existence, but the repetition and actions described in the passage above became the foundation of her late practice. (Lippard 1992:p.29)

In final appearance, my knotted pieces of plastic canvas are reminiscent of pieces by Rosemarie Trockel, particularly *Untitled (Amaca, red-white)*, and the work of Diane Itter. However, the construction method differs from those precedents, Trockel's piece a conventionally-made rug, and Itter's work not supported by a base at all; all the rigidity coming from the tight knots themselves. Sarah Parrish explains that for Itter, the fringes of her pieces are of "secondary importance" to the knots themselves, although she credits them with giving the pieces a sense of movement and drawing attention to the labour involved in their creation (2014:p.204).

In contrast, my use of plastic canvas allows for gaps and shapes to be more easily defined, and for the recollection of an architectural vernacular. The rigidity of the plastic means that voids are possible, rendering the forms almost carved and sharply dimensional within the masses of wool. This reinforces the distinction between the tight focal point of the knots and the unruly strands that surround them. The plastic also makes them curiously fragile. Adorned with over two kilograms of wool each, any attempt at hanging them just results in the canvas breaking under the weight. They must stay on the floor. These pieces are resistant to a final placement, or a definitive position, and I reinforce these potential shifts and inescapable movement through the use of video and photography.

The physicality of constructing these pieces and the immutable time they took to complete meant that my days had to be neatly divided to accommodate the written component of this project: in the mornings I wrote, and in the afternoon I made. I wrote in the mornings to use up the first clarity and focus of the day. I wrote until my head was no longer formulating coherent sentences, and until I could no longer focus on the goal of the project.

These are always my best hours, and there was a sacrifice in giving them over almost exclusively to



Figure 38: The Delays I, 2014

writing in the last year of the project. On a few rare days I used that energy for my studio work, neglecting my daily word count. Although anyone supporting me through this process, and any likely reader of this text would accept these days without words as normal and useful, there was a perpetual and accompanying guilt. This guilt did not manifest on the days where I only wrote and ignored the unfinished objects in the studio. Despite best intentions, the writing always seems to outweigh the art.

Presented alongside this text are the following components as part of the final PhD submission:

Breeze Block Pile I and II

The forms of these two black and white pieces are taken from breeze block patterns, a utopic mid-century building material, now associated with council estates or Californian architecture depending on your own cultural reference point. I've long been drawn to the decorative effect they introduce into banal settings. In this manifestation, any original function is subverted – they lack the structural integrity necessary for construction blocks, and no breeze would pass through the thick masses of yarn. These two objects represent countless hours of labour, and given that I could only work on them for a few hours in the afternoon, they took a year to complete.

Once the *Blocks* were made, I took a series of photographs positioning and repositioning the objects to understand how they were working, and the ways in which they could be seen by a camera. When I look at them in my studio, I see only detail, only errant strands and tiny knots. But the camera enforces a distanced view. The pattern emerges across the frame, pulled out of the mass of threads.

The rugs are disruptive and difficult. They resist most placements, and easy reading. They remain elusive even when inert.

Marble Cloths

The marble cloths are photographed fabric, ribbon, tyvek and yarn dropped onto the floor and positioned to resemble the seams and irregularities of metamorphic rocks. By mirroring the images, the cloth replicates the material use as cladding in architecture, frequently seen in churches, and famously used by Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe in the Barcelona Pavilion. These works use the methods of post-minimalism to collapse the soft and the rigid in series of repeats; unstable cloth, frozen through photography, reprinted onto cloth, sewn into rigid geometric, monolithic forms, collapsing once again as cloth. The works transform scraps back into a canonical art material, an illusory and cool marble surface.

The marble cloth manifests throughout the project in the title pages of each of the chapters of this

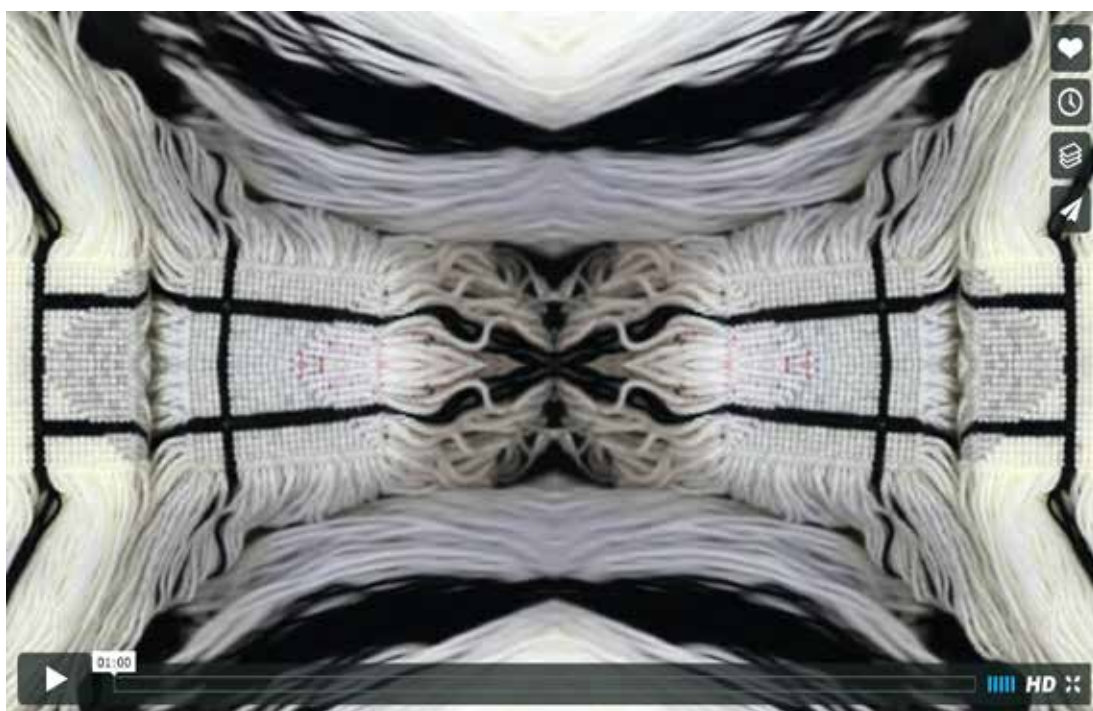


Figure 39: Panel Game, video still, 2016

document, printed onto the cloth binding the artist books that accompany this work, and onto soft fabric plinths that surround *Breeze Block Pile I* and *II*.

Handbook for Curators who are Interested in Using Cloth

As it became evident that the exhibition format was a rich, but often disappointing source of examples of textile narratives, I was encouraged by my supervisory team to propose my own ‘textile’ exhibition. An obvious approach to this exercise would be to simply pull out the art discussed in this text and reify it through a series of large gallery rooms. But as I became ambivalent about the possibilities of exhibitions solving the problematic narratives of textiles, this text developed as a way of articulating that frustration and to the idea that a singular exhibition could succeed in ushering in a new acceptance of the material.

The Panel Game

These flipbooks feature four knotted rug pieces, made prior to *Breeze Block Piles* and based on Le Corbusier’s *Panel Game* as described in his text *Modulor*. Within this volume he proposes a system for bisecting squares and then combining them in an infinite series of arrangements, both for pleasure and to understand how space can be divided architecturally. Typefied by Corbusier’s system of measuring based on his own male body, I find much modernist architecture both an aesthetic comfort, and theoretical repellent. I accept that the forms are exacting and aesthetically appealing, while also acknowledging that, like most architecture and post-war civic planning, they were devised with scant regard for the women who would live there.

When I translate these architectural forms into unstable cloth, it satisfies an impulse to take something remote and pristine and make it into a tactile, knowable object, albeit one still floppy and uncertain, resistant to definitive positions or authority. *The Panel Game* squares take the rational system proposed by Corbusier and overlay it onto a mass of ill-behaved yarn.

A minute-long loop of the squares being positioned and repositioned was created for a mutoscope project that was part of the *International Festival of Projections* in Canterbury in March 2016 (Figure 39). Mutoscopes are early cinematic devices where images (often of a risqué nature) were printed onto thousands of cards attached to a wheel that were animated, much like a flipbook, as the viewer turned the wheel. The mutoscope introduces a haptic quality back into a work that was created by manual shifting the panels. The hands of the viewer become the hands of the artist. At the end of the project, I removed the cards from the mutoscope and turned them into a series of flipbooks.

Video



Figure 40: Untitled, first knotted piece, 2015

The video works are an oblique explanation of a studio process. Shot in a long singular take, the objects in the studio are manipulated and shifted, and the resulting image is mirrored twice. This replicates a system of positioning and repositioning without revealing either my own hand, or a final photographic still of an arrangement. Instead, the shifting and unstable nature of the cloth is emphasised.

Conclusions

The methodologies underpinning this project could be understood as a series of negotiations of language; the need to fill in an incomplete art historical narrative balanced with a purposefully silent studio space.

The process could also be understood as a post-structuralist response to received narratives; an acknowledgement that there are rhizomatic arrangements within and beyond the dominant frameworks, and an acceptance of the impossibility of an objective grand narrative. In the introduction to *Minor Architecture*, Jill Stoner writes about her own research process: “[this] is a story that could be told through infinite compositions or references and sources; it claims no particular or final authority. My travels are not so considerable; I have seen only the places I saw. My library is limited; I have read only the books that I read. I take enormous pleasure in orchestrating dialogues among writers who may never before have occupied the same page.” (2012:p.x)

In this straightforward and honest appraisal of the limitations of her own text, I find comfort. My project sketches the border of a vast territory, and an infinite number of paths could be taken through the terrain. The sources and examples I have selected have been chosen to most clearly delineate this thread of instability, but in its singularity, it is necessarily selective and partial.

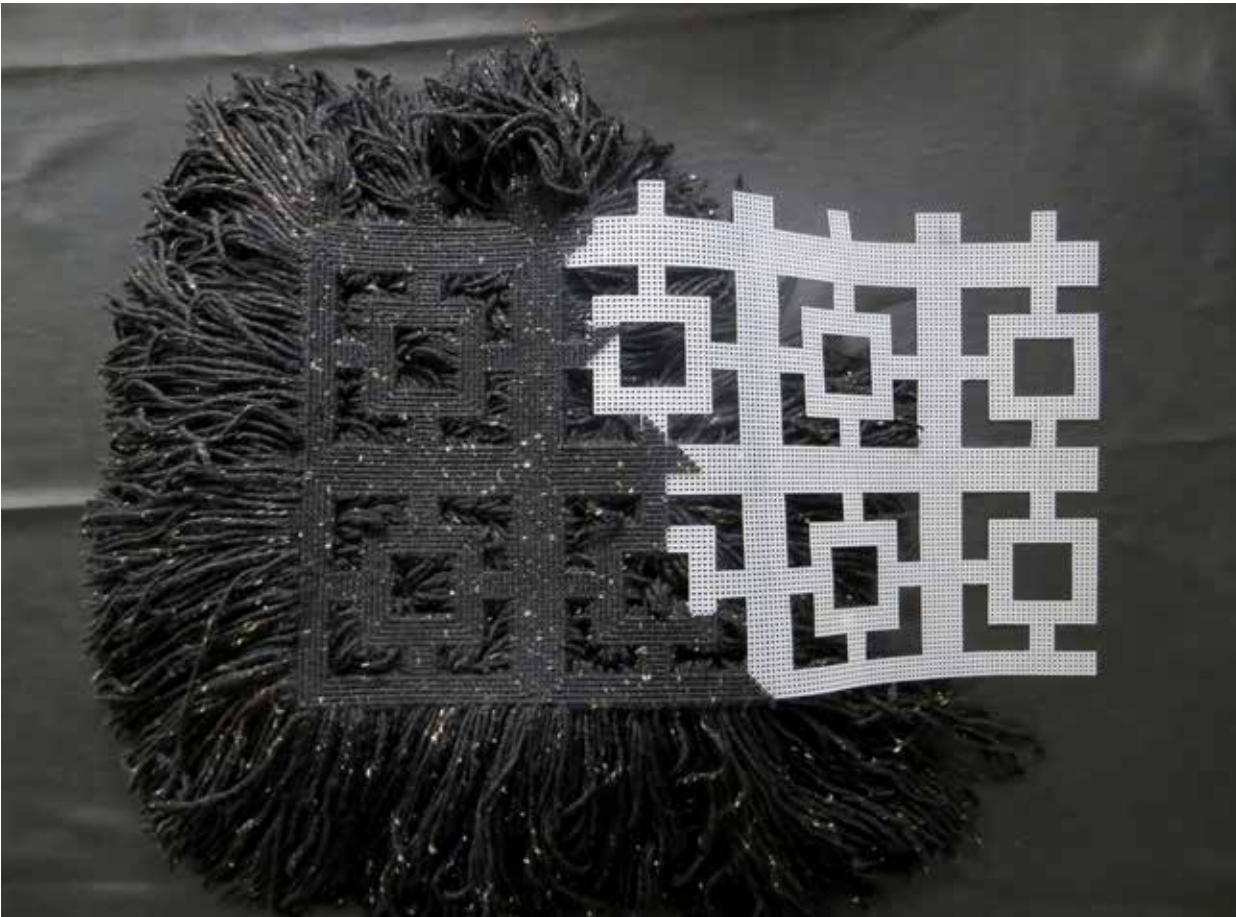


Figure 41: Breeze Block Pile I in progress

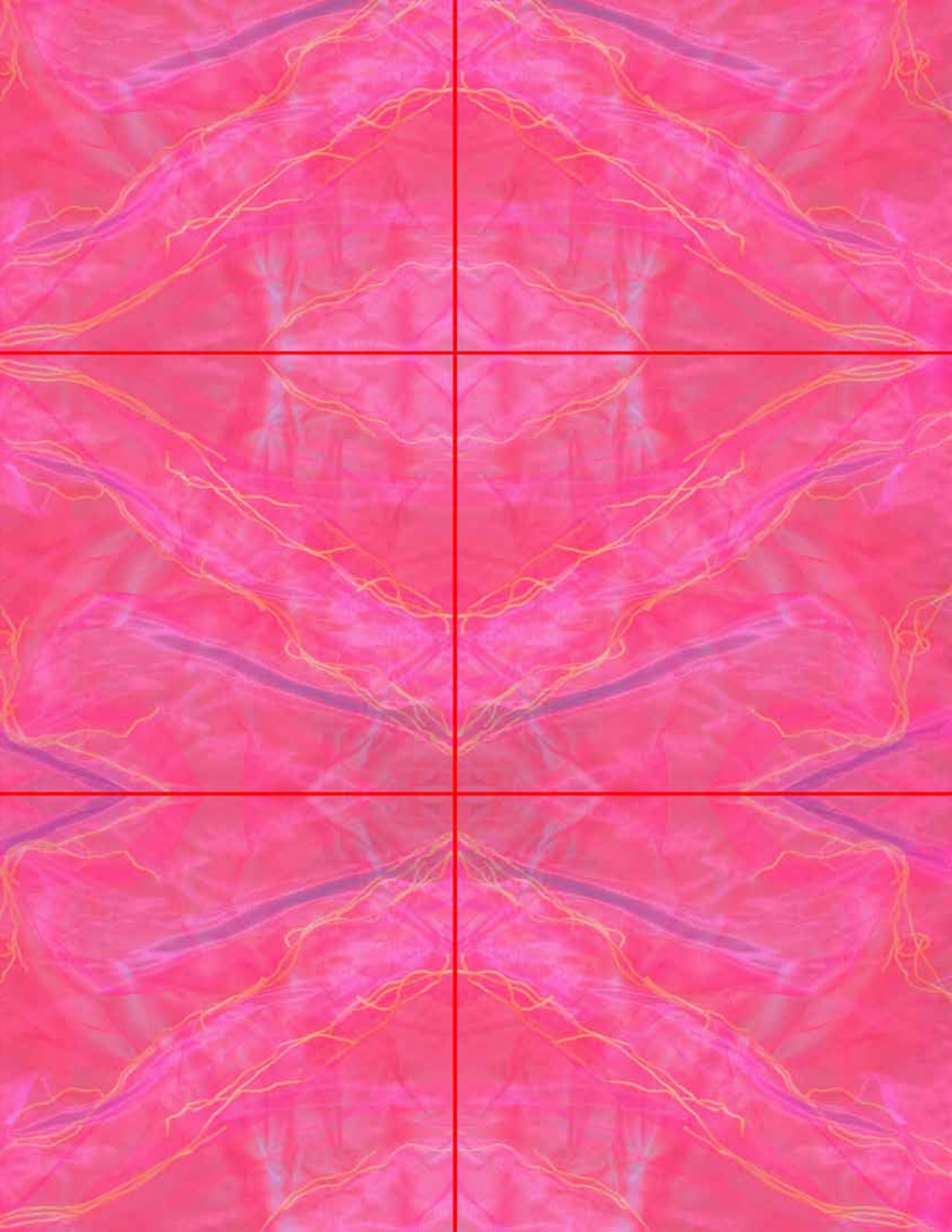
And the Next Day

The writing is hard today. It's come just after an easy day, one where thoughts lined up politely to be briskly typed and word count targets were met cheerfully. I'm working on a complex section, and doubt creeps in to every word; all of the criticisms I've received over the past two years bound tightly to my fingers, stopping them from moving and finishing my sentences.

My clear morning head has almost fully dissipated. Thoughts of laundry, food, errands and the project, the project, the project start to wade into the void.

The background is a vibrant, abstract composition of wavy, flowing lines in shades of pink, orange, and light blue. These lines are set against a solid red background. A thin red grid is overlaid on the entire image, dividing it into a 2x2 grid of quadrants. The word "Structure" is centered in the middle of the image, overlapping the grid lines.

Structure



An Instability of Structure

Part 1 - Penelope

As the evenings drew in, Penelope and her twelve maids began to divide their work; some of them preparing the palace for night and sleep: securing the rooms, cleaning and clearing, ensuring that the now quiet household was ready for the morning's activities. And some of them secretly lighting up the hall in preparation for work, Penelope readying herself to covertly unpick all of the cloth she had woven in the preceding daylight hours.

To keep one hundred and eight suitors at bay during her husband Odysseus's long period of absence, Penelope had devised a plan. She told them that she could not consider their marriage proposals until she had finished weaving a funeral shroud for her elderly father-in-law, King Laertes. The men agreed to this noble and chaste activity, but as they bitterly complained to her son years later:

So by day she used to weave at the great web but every night had torches set beside it and undid the work. For three years she took us in by this trick. A fourth began, and the seasons were slipping by, when one of her women who knew all about it gave her mistress away. We caught her unravelling her beautiful work, and she was forced reluctantly to complete it. (Homer, 1991:p.17)

For this relatively brief period in Odysseus' twenty-year absence, Penelope was able to use this fluctuating object to create a space of autonomy for herself and her family. As Marilyn Katz discusses in her text *Penelope's Renown*, this state of not entirely belonging to any one man is an anomalous position for a woman at that time. Katz notes how Penelope's appearing and disappearing cloth allows her to remain in this indeterminate state, equally engaging with the suitors while attempting to keep the situation static for the return of her husband, thus granting her a curious agency (1991:p.7).

The warp-weighted looms of Ancient Greece were worked vertically, unlike the horizontal ones that came into fashion in Europe a few centuries later (Figure 42). A weaver can sit at these more modern looms, using foot treadles to move the warp threads, and a shuttle to send the weft back and forth. It's a physical act, but a stationary one (Figure 43). In these vertical looms, the long strands of the warp were pulled down by clay weights, keeping everything taut. The weaver walked the weft back and forth, not resting in one place. Penelope enacted her own odyssey as she unceasingly paced the length of the loom to first make the cloth appear, and then pulled it apart; the threads wound back up.

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Depictions of Penelope at two different styles of looms, warp-weighted and the later four-post loom. *Figure 42 (Top): Telemachus and Penelope at her loom*, fifth century BCE, Red Clay Athenian vase
Figure 43 (Bottom): J.W. Waterhouse, Penelope and the Suitors, oil on canvas, 1912.

It is easy to feel incredulous with this tale; had the suitors looked down at these string-wrapped clay lumps, they would have seen that new warp thread was never pulled loose from them. Had they looked up at the unchanging roll of finished cloth that should have had new threads added to its widening girth every day, they may have become suspicious. Had they put in place even the most basic monitoring, they could have tracked the cloth, and made plans for the future of Penelope and her estate.

Elizabeth Wayland Barber contends that in the intervening years, these incredulous circumstances have become amplified because we have also not considered this cloth carefully. Although the suitors would not have had direct experience of weaving themselves, every home had a loom and they would have been aware that a normal funerary cloth might take a few weeks to complete, but certainly not a few years. Instead, she suggests that Penelope must have been weaving an intricately-patterned story cloth, where the configurations of the threads would have been unpredictable and complicated; a convoluted pattern to obscure the suitors (1994:p.154).

This complex fabric and its unravelling enabled Penelope to create a shroud that was not spoken of for years as she twisted the endlessly repositionable and flexible threads through the warp and then back again, the thin yarn defining a mobile space for her to exist - her movements allowing a delicate, whisper-weight stasis caught inbetween building and pulling apart.

Part 2 - The First Great Softening and Reconsidered Autonomies

These ancient and mythological movements of Penelope and her threads echo through the first moments of widespread textile exploration within and around fine art practices, when cloth was also being built up and torn down. From the 1960s onwards there are increasing experimentations with cloth-based work, emerging from two loose groupings of practices, often divided along categories of 'art' and 'craft'. As Chapter 2 outlined, the narratives surrounding this softening are contested and debated given their uneven and prejudiced legacy. While this chapter acknowledges the particular historical differences between the two strands of cloth-based work that emerged at that time, it seeks to move beyond a hierarchical model of the practices to instead look at how the divergent usage of materials of these two groups, the building of craft-informed practices and the unbuilding of practices understood to be art, can be viewed as points on a continuum of material engagement. Both groups influenced by a post-industrial landscape, and finding seemingly contradictory methods of manipulating cloth.

Penelope Curtis suggests that the initial modernist shift from the canonical sculptural materials of bronze and marble arose from both a change in the ways artists wanted to make work and an interest in exploring the resonances that a heterogeneous mix of materials could offer. The sculptor

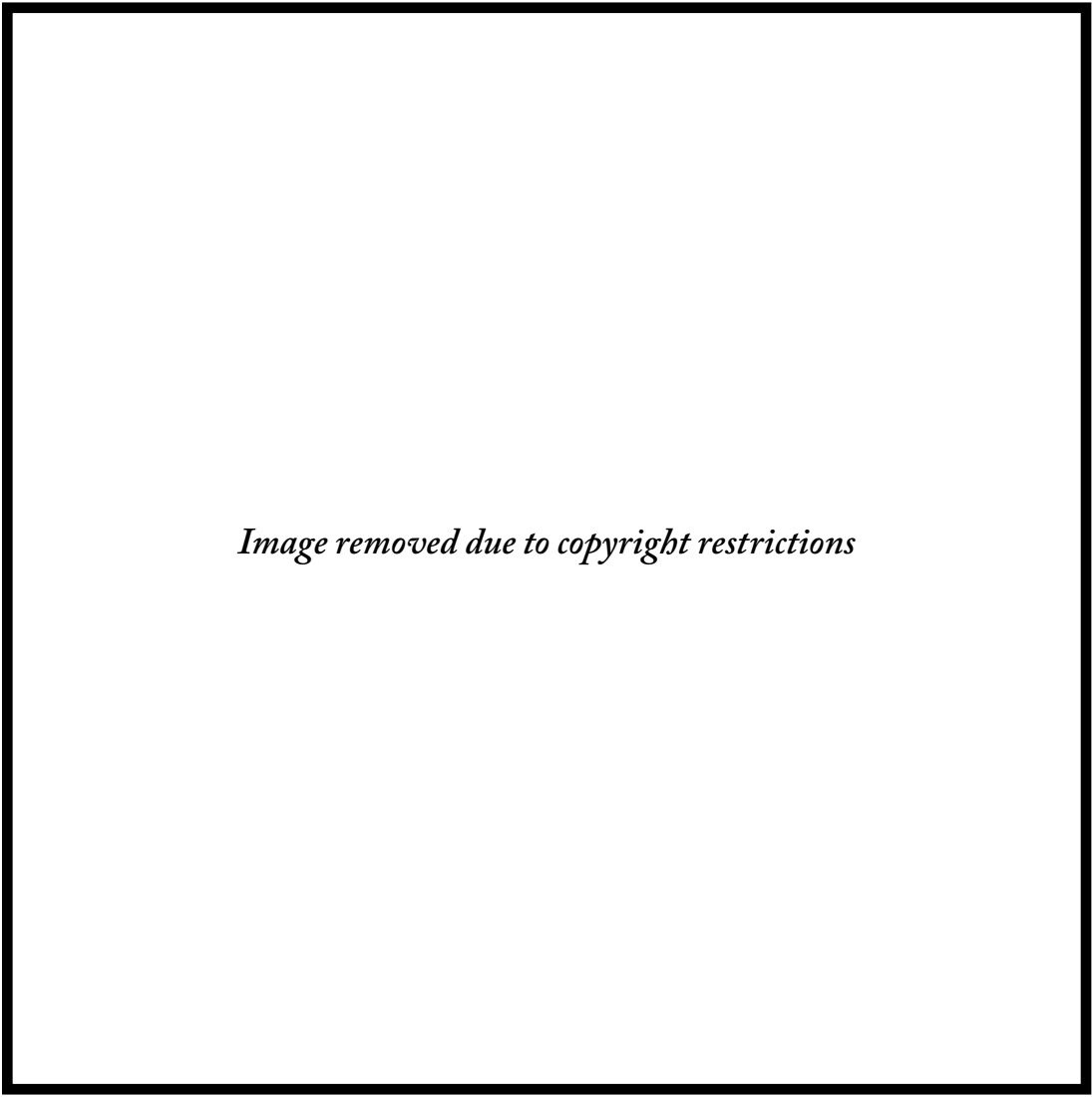


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*Figure 44: Claes Oldenburg and Patty Mucha performing in *The Street*, 1960*

in the late nineteenth century, as typified by Rodin, saw the artist overseeing a bustling atelier of assistants and this soon provoked questions of authenticity and authorship. To counter these concerns, sculptors moved away from clay models and bronze editions to work directly with materials and reductive carving methods resurged in popularity. However, other idiosyncratic methods of assembly were also coming to the fore, occurring alongside *3 Standard Stoppages*. Curtis explains that modernist movements adopted these new approaches to materials, both for the speed and immediacy they offered in contrast to carving¹ and because “the combination of diverse materials made for the play of contrasts: of opaque and transparent, thin and thick, rough and smooth.” (1999:p.100)

Although textiles sometimes found their way onto the lists of new possible materials,² they were not widely taken up until the post-war period when throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s instances of textile exploration erupted in the post-minimalist movement of New York, Arte Povera in Italy, through practitioners like Barry Flanagan in the United Kingdom, and in the American Fiber and European Tapestry Movements.

Working with cloth, latex, or felt was a particularly successful strategy to renegotiate a number of aesthetic autonomies that were in circulation during the period. If, as an early example (or ‘the first’ as we are reminded by Morris), we take the material usage in the soft sculptures of Claes Oldenburg, his use of fabric and its attendant references to an everyday and accessible material world outside the gallery, refuted a Greenbergian autonomy, as described in ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, that articulated a version of the avant-garde as a continual process of an absolute engagement with material and a negation of content. An endeavour, that he notes: “keeps culture *moving* in the midst of ideological confusion and revolt.” (1939:p.541) Culture is therefore self-generative and insulated from the unpredictable fluctuations of society, and with which only citizens of adequate education and economic standing are able to participate.

Instead, Oldenburg’s use of cloth in his three installations of the early 1960s, *The Street*, *The Store* and *The Home*, could be interpreted as an attempt to engage with an autonomy aligned with Theodor Adorno’s definition; one that proposes the necessity of art’s intrinsic relationship with society. Adorno denies the superiority of an artistic autonomy that espouses the separation of art and society as exemplified in Greenberg, suggesting that the rejection of the ‘empirical world’ is in itself a reification: ‘by virtue of rejection of the empirical world [...] art sanctions the primacy of reality’ (1997:p.2). This sanctioning of the society of its production enables the work to function in a capitalistic system and curtails its ability to function with criticality; it can too easily be commodified. Adorno, wary of culturally reductive readings of art, still refutes the possibility of

1 Curtis notes that traditional carving in wood and stone were often not taught in art schools, even in the early twentieth century, as these techniques were more strongly associated with woodworking and masonry, not fine art practices.

2 In the 1912 Futurist Manifesto, Umberto Boccioni lists a “modest sample of these materials: glass, wood, cardboard, cement, concrete, horsehair, leather, cloth, mirrors, electric lights, etc.” (Quoted Curtis, 1999, p. 100)

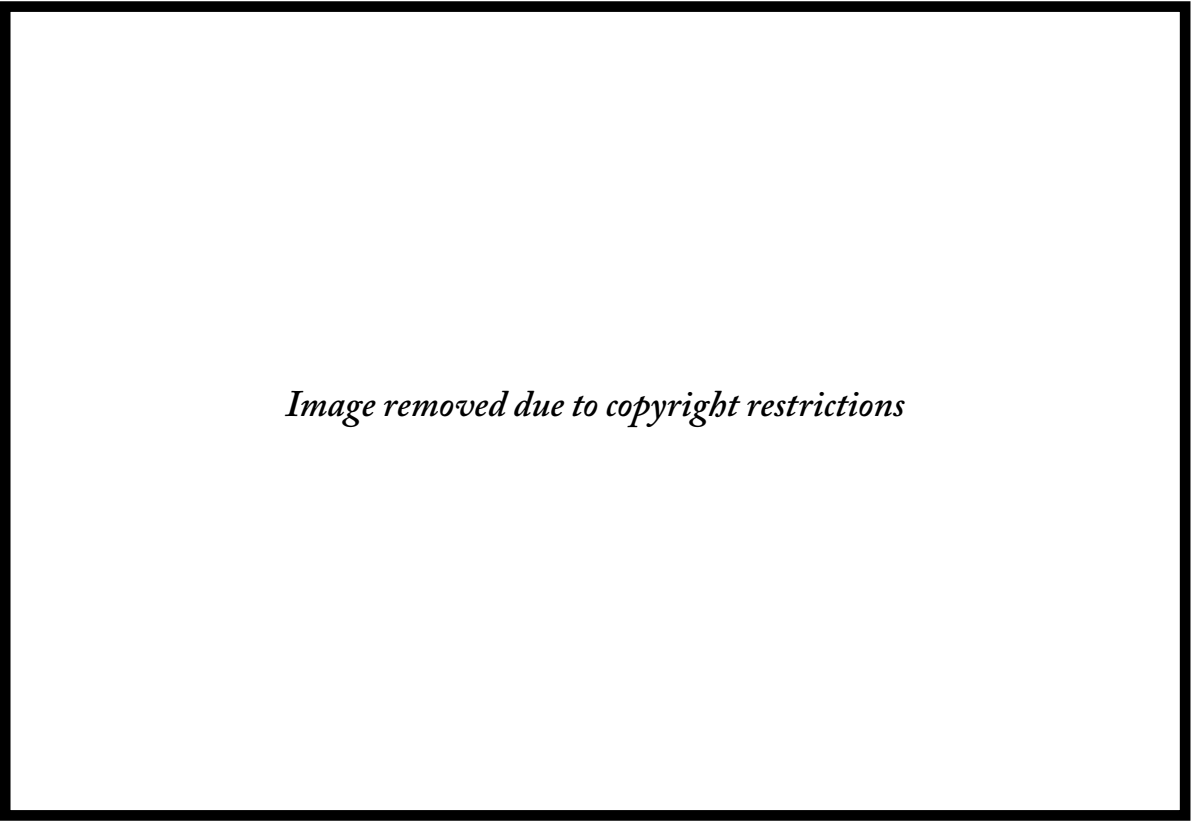


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*Figure 45: Claes Oldenburg in *The Store*, 1961*

separating the work from the context of its creation stating that “there is no contesting the cliché of which cultural history is so fond, that the development of artistic processes, [...] corresponds to social development.” (1997:p.5)

In this formulation, a work of art establishes autonomy and criticality not through a linear and progressive refinement of material absolutes as envisaged in Greenberg, but through a perpetual revolution “retaining a negativity of reality and taking a position to it” (1997:p.12) and must therefore constantly question itself to maintain that criticality, understanding their own transience: “Artworks are perishable.[...] Admixed with art’s own concept is the ferment of its own abolition” (1997:p.12).

In the landscapes created by Oldenburg’s exhibitions, the three settings of the titles become progressively more intimate spaces, as the scale of the objects takes on exaggerated dimensions and the material progresses from the rough, found masses of cardboard, burlap, and wire in *The Street*, (Figure 44) to the plaster-coated muslin objects in *The Store* (Figure 45), to finally, the over-sized, gleaming, and drooping vinyl sculptures in *Home* (Figure 46).³ These objects, becoming increasingly fetishized, gargantuan, and polished symbols further and further removed from their everyday counterparts, acted as a small antagonism to the New York art market by presenting both an alternative model for the purchase and consumption of the objects and by proposing works of art that were intrinsically linked to the banal everyday.

In his writings about *The Store* from a 1969 talk at MoMA, Oldenburg signals the necessity and ultimate futility of art’s constant evolution as a means of “escaping [the] bourgeois values in America” (1961-69:p.85), aligning to Adorno’s own constant questioning of its criticality. He writes: “I don’t think you can win. Duchamp is ultimately labelled art too. The bourgeois scheme is that they wish to be disturbed from time to time, they like that, but then they envelop you, and that little bit is over, and they are ready for the next.” (1961-69:p.85) *The Store* was a disruptive strategy that would have to be reinvented, and whose objects would inevitably be absorbed into the circulations of the art market. Or as Yve-Allain Bois pithily explains, “Oldenburg knew very well that the objects he sold in the store would end up in a museum” (1997:p.176). Although unable to entirely reconfigure the capitalistic systems underpinning the art world of New York, Oldenburg invokes Adorno’s approach of creating work that also draws attention to the economies at play: “The store tries to overcome the sense of guilt connected with money and sales which the artist has – either inherited or to rationalize his lack of ability to make money”(1961-69:p.93). As the objects move from the detritus of the street to the new industrial materials they become increasingly floppy, oversized and mutable, their imagined function melting away as they simultaneously reject the high modernist discourse of formalism and the binaries of painting and sculpture, actual and illusion.

The shifting, soft piles of Oldenburg’s sculptures serve to reveal a third autonomy emergent in this

3 The fabric objects in the last two installations sewn by his wife, Patty Mucha.

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*Figure 46: Claes Oldenburg, *The Home*, 1964*

work, one that would come to define much of the textile-based work that followed; the structural autonomy of the sculptural object itself in relation to its architectural surroundings. Curtis contends that the prevalence of sculpture in public space and integrated into the nineteenth century façade of Western European cities hampered its ability to be appreciated as an autonomous art form, noting that its “close association with the fabric of the built environment meant that it took much longer than painting to shake off its deep-rooted connection with a public function.” (1999:p.5) She reminds us that most sculpture at the start of the modern period was not considered within a gallery setting, aside from the celebrated outliers like Rodin. Through this integration into not only the civic landscape, but also as the site of the reification of the established order through public monuments, sculpture was not able to articulate a critical autonomy. (1999)

Oldenburg epitomised the ways in which the introduction of fabric in the post-war period furthers a material experimentation that was synchronous with renewed social engagement in the position of art, and it altered the way in which works could be made by introducing the immediacy of Jackson Pollock’s paint drips or Duchamp’s string to a more complex sculptural language. Additionally, the slumping uncertainty of cloth severs the ties between a functional and decorative sculpture and its architectural surroundings.

Part 3 - Robert Morris and Magdalena Abakanowicz

The autonomous criticality in the textile-based sculptural works that followed Oldenburg is perhaps less immediately apparent, or overtly politically charged. If we consider two of the more prominent fibrous works from the 1960s side by side however, a political engagement through material usage can be understood. During this period, working in New York and Poland respectively, Robert Morris and Magdalena Abakanowicz both began sustained series of works, his generally untitled *Felt Pieces* and her *Abakans*; deep, folded structures, not quite expansively architectural but the swathes and folds of fabric too loose and cavernous to be garments. Superficially, there are numerous formal similarities between the *Felt Pieces* of Morris (Figure 47) and Abakanowicz’s *Abakans* (Figure 48); they hang in ways that reference sensual forms while resisting clear allusions, both shaped by gravity. However, much like the works of Saret and Adams in Chapter 2, these similarities disguise vastly differing contexts, intentions and studio methodologies.

Abakanowicz created the *Abakans* in post-war, Communist Poland, having studied an interdisciplinary programme including textiles at the Gdansk Academy of Fine Arts (although blocked from studying sculpture purportedly because the instructor felt she had ‘no feeling for form’ (Ingnot, 2004:p.24)) and the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Using traditional weavings methods, she was able to create physical structures far more expansive than her small studio space by working with material that could be rolled up as it came off the loom and tucked away. Weaving was encouraged by the Polish government for its ties to traditional folk craft, as it was thought to be

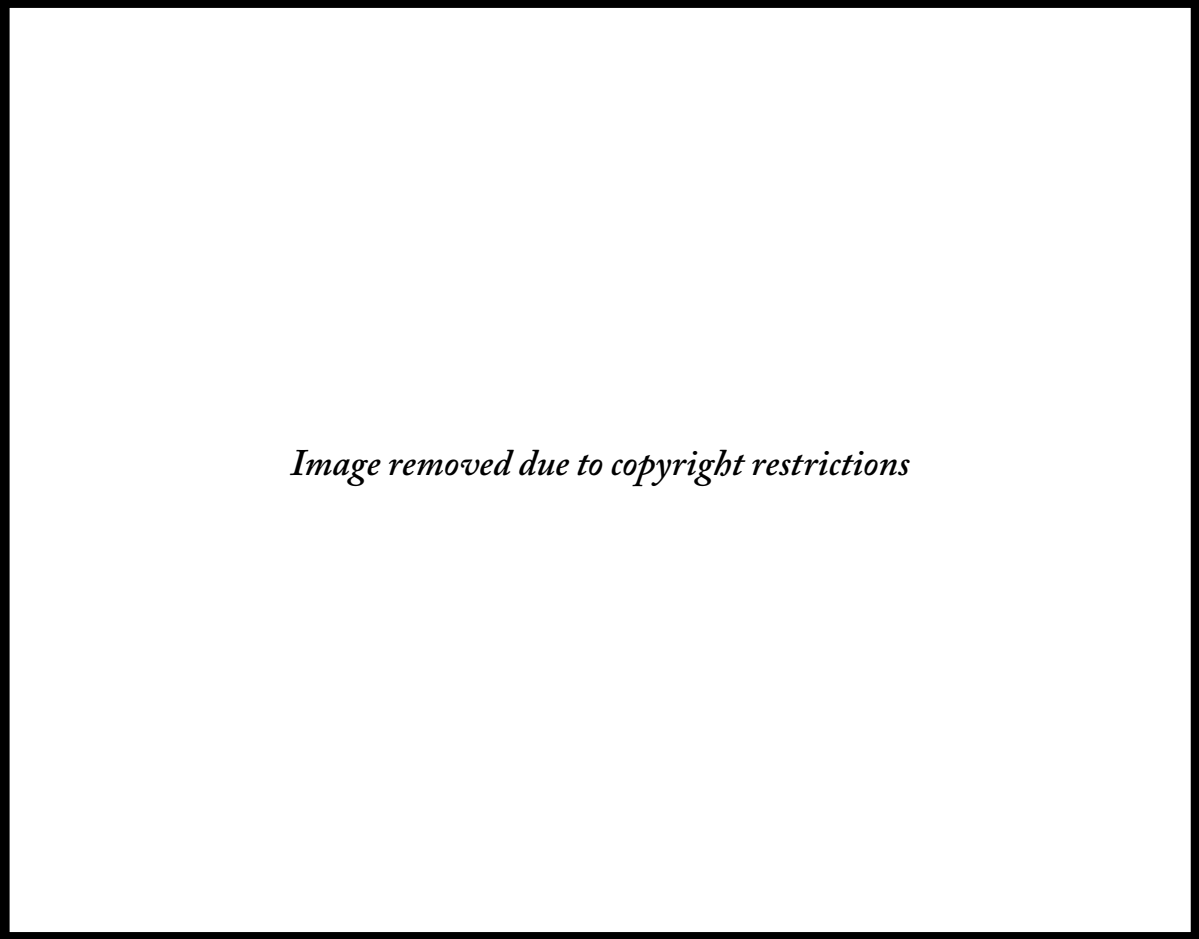


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*Figure 47: Robert Morris, *Untitled Felt Pieces* from the exhibition *Felt Sculptures*, Leo Castelli Gallery, 1968*

“the most suitable medium for the incorporation of the arts into everyday life” (Inglot, 2004:p.29); however, Abakanowicz was able to adhere to certain traditional forms while creating unique structures, and in doing so, receive permission to travel outside the country and exhibit the works in Lausanne and New York. This innovation through cloth also enabled an experimentation with form and abstraction that was unavailable to painters as the Communist Party strongly favoured social realism.⁴

The bulk of the *Abakan's* sisal fibres were found in the harbour, as she walked the miles to collect them, unwinding, dyeing, and then wrapping them into long warps and rolling them into wefts. This was an odyssey, a derive, a reincarnation of the Baudelaire's Rag Picker that we will visit in Chapter 6. This process is completely transformative, and the sisal was supplemented with horse hair, brightened into saturated reds and acid yellows until the ropes lost their identity to become the forms. This found material parallels the heaps of abandoned rope used by Eva Hesse during her residency in Kettwig-an der-Ruhr in 1965, material that gave her a means of making her drawings sculptural. These piles of extravagant waste reshaped the direction of both of their practices.

The industrial felt used by Morris' does not have the same romantic origin story or a direct link to his training; Morris moved from San Francisco to New York in the late 1950s to complete a Masters at Hunter and moved from being a painter to having an increasingly divergent practice in the 1960s influenced by John Cage, the 'ordinary movements' of his first wife and dancer Simone Forti, and the recently revived legacy of Duchamp. This was the culmination of a peripatetic decade that saw Morris, studying art, engineering, and philosophy at three different universities, serving in the US Army, and living in San Francisco, before settling in New York. His work mirrors this restlessness and he scavenged the dumpsters and hardware stores of Canal St (Weiss, 2013:p.27), drawing on his early training as an engineer and memories of piles of clothing in his mother's house. From 1960-65, just before the *Felt Pieces*, he made 103 small-scale sculptures, including *Three Rulers*, that juxtaposed soft lead, with rigid knotted ropes, smooth planks of wood with piles of threadwaste, a material he encountered working as a switchman.

This eclectic materiality often cements Morris' status as a conceptual artist, someone for whom the idea was primary over the matter. But one of his descriptions of the genesis of his early seminal work *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (1961) complicates that picture. Morris describes wanting to work with walnut as the smell reminded him of his childhood in Missouri. As he only had enough funds to purchase one plank of walnut, and in order to accord this plank even greater significance and respect, he recorded the sounds of the box being constructed. While the work depicts a relationship between form and process, the wood itself, and its associated sensorial memories, were the catalysts.

4 Inglot recounts the story of Abakanowicz's first solo show in 1960 that was to include watercolours and four abstract weavings; the show was initially cancelled due to breaching the 15% limit of exhibitions showing 'bourgeois' abstract paintings, but was then permitted to go ahead once officials were reassured that the textile pieces were merely designs for interior decoration. (2004:p.39)

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*Figure 48: Magdalena Abakanowicz, **Black Environment**, 1970-78*

Weiss explains that the inter-related aspects of material and concept were both central to the epistemological investigations igniting Morris' work from this period. He quotes Morris' own account of his experimentations: "Kant asked "What can I know and how can I know it?" In my naïve way I was asking what can I make and how can I make it? So, then followed the typology of materials from solid to liquid to gas, from continuous to fractures to particulate, from rigid to flexible, and the role of intention and chance, etc. etc." (quoted in Weiss, 2013:p.27). Weiss notes that we should not understand Morris' use of materials and his process as either "purely systematic" nor as "a question of circumstances (or childhood memories) alone", but he explains that the "circumstances of the work obviously informed the conditions of the making; along with the various media and processes of fabrication, they are at times even alluded to or portrayed." (Weiss, 2013: p. 27)

This shift in perspective from defining a work through its final parameters to instead understanding its evolution as a fluid series of negotiations between artist and material aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the narrative of materials; a model of production taken up in material culture particularly by Tim Ingold. A narrative of materials rejects a 'hylomorphic model' where the final product is a 1:1 replica of the imagined object. Instead, the idea of the object changes as the interactions with the material develops. Neither the conceptual system nor the material circumstances take primacy (Ingold, 2013:p.20). Thinking about this in relation to *3 Standard Stoppages*, Duchamp's work is contingent on the moment when the conceptual framework and the material conditions collide.

In both Morris and Abakanowicz's works, the narratives of materials can be read by the viewer. Perhaps the process is most transparent in the *Abakans* where the technique reveals changes in texture, variations in the dye lots of the coloured fibres, the eruptions of horse hair, the slits and labial folds that interrupt the work all suggest a flowing conversation between hand and thread.

In Morris' *Felt Pieces*, the material is given more agency as he sets up parameters for precise incisions, cloth, and gravity to coalesce into forming the work. As Rosalind Krauss wrote, citing Morris:

Artistic form, Morris now observed, is always the result of a continual struggle against gravity. [...] To forsake armatures and work directly with soft materials like cloth or latex was to produce art in which "considerations of gravity become as important as those of space," and where random piling, loose stacking, hanging, give passing form to the material. (1994:p.97)

But there's an important and fundamental difference; Morris found the industrial felt that he systematically sliced to create unpredictable folds, while Abakanowicz built up her forms from

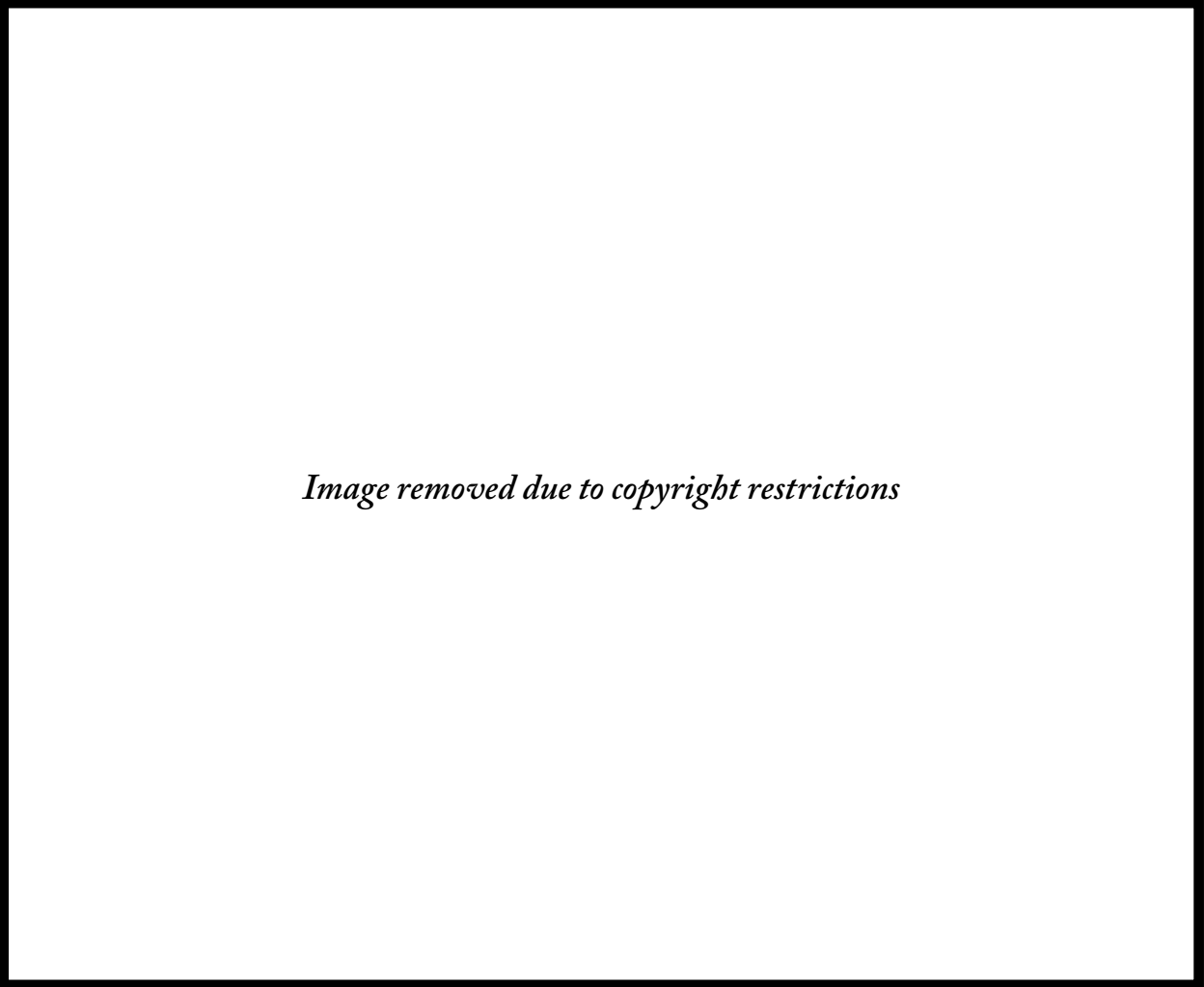


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*Figure 49: Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*, 1969*

fibres. The *Abakans* are heroically-scaled articulations of dominance and control over an environment, often reinforced through their installation, compared to Morris' acknowledged submission to physical forces. Thread by thread, Abakanowicz created her constructions, while Morris instantly removed all sense of structure and stability with a few precise movements of his razor.

Despite shared formal qualities in these two works, Abakanowicz's series defied gravity before giving way; there is a built-in resistance to build up large, hubristic forms, resisting the flexibility of the material. She, and many other fibre artists were not only making their own cloth, they were making near free-standing structures, oversized constructions, defining and occupying space. Morris, on the other hand, continued his experiments with the industrial materials that surrounded him, slicing and puncturing to render evident their materiality and their fallibility.

Part 4 - Meta-Narrative of Materials

A legacy of uneven receptions obscures how the *Abakans* and the *Felt Pieces* are considered in the contemporary moment; discourses are preoccupied with the instant canonisation of Morris and the post-minimalists, and the forgotten and relegated histories of Abakanowicz and other fiber-informed practitioners. Inglot argues that an unsatisfactory reception of Abakanowicz's work within a fine art context could have prompted her shift away from fibre: "the unyielding hierarchies of the art world, [led to] Abakanowicz's desire to escape the confines of what she later described as the "craft ghetto" and to establish a reputation as a mainstream sculptor was decisive in precipitating this radical shift" (2004:p.33). Although she still used textiles in her later figurative sculpture, Abakanowicz shifted to casting industrially-made cloth into figurative forms; an approach more easily accepted in fine art.

In Auther's study examining the different reception of art and craft practices in the 1960s, there is a suggestion that the range of materials used by post-minimalist artists demonstrates a cynical engagement with the materials, and an assumption that the greater success of artists like Morris and Hesse was due to their catholic approach; the diversity of media shielding them from the label of "fiber artist". Auther compares the use of textiles in Fiber and Tapestry movements with the the post-minimalist practices of Morris and Hesse in the following manner: "[Morris and Hesse] found forms of fibre such as rope or felt attractive for their ordinariness and other "non-art" attributes-the very attributes fibre artists struggled to dismiss. Indeed, to the extent that they embraced fibre's everyday utility, Process or post-minimalist artists worked at a cross-purpose with fiber artists, undermining the latter's belief in art's autonomy, preciousness, and durability." (2010:p.xxii)

Within this summation, Auther outlines a fraught dynamic that seems to conflate the critical reception of the work of these two groupings with the artists' own intentions. While the overall aims of projects like Auther's and the Textile Survey Shows are important to expose and rectify the

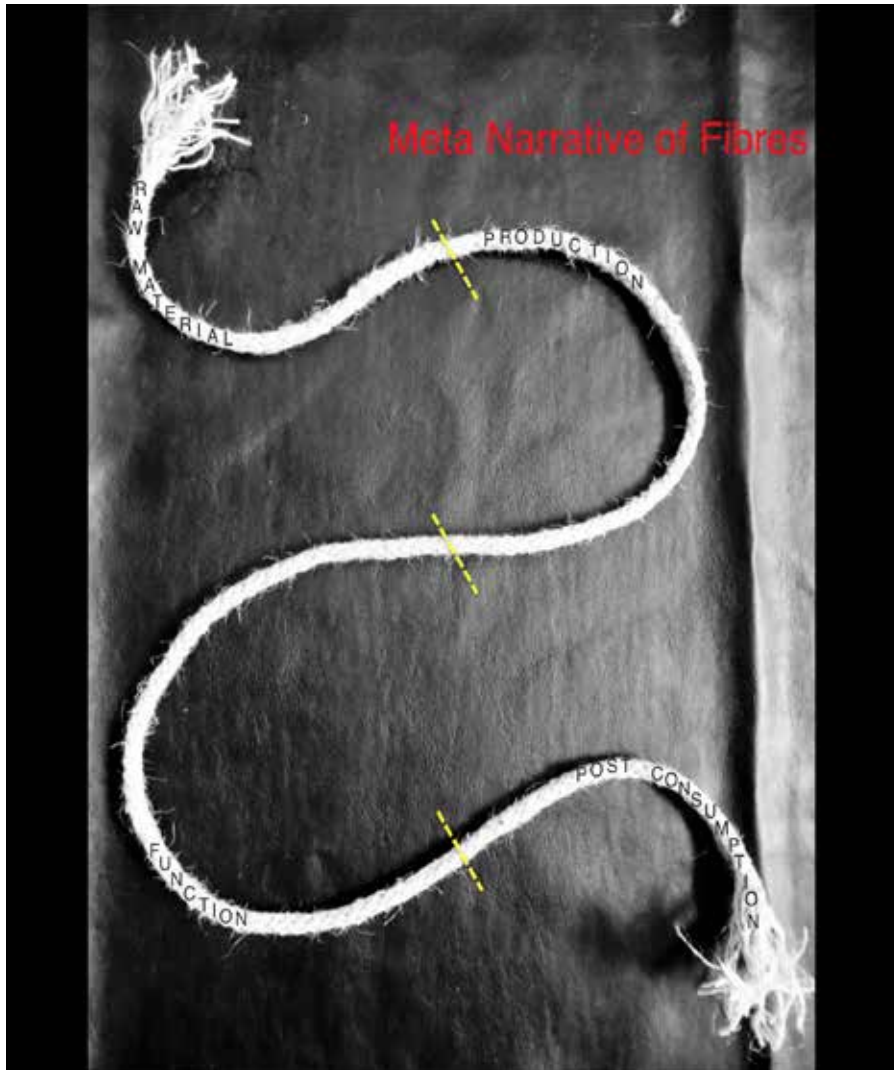


Figure 50: Meta Narrative of Materials

prejudicial treatment experienced by Fiber or Tapestry practitioners, a persistent reinforcement of oppositional categorisations can reinforce an idea that cloth is a material without content. Instead, it is possible to understand the works of these various movements as both being informed by the political and social contexts of the production, as the artists worked through negotiations of material and context.

In order to move beyond this oppositional dynamic, and better consider the specificities of the material usage, these works can be considered on a meta-narrative of fibre, “meta” to mark a layer of remove from the narrative of materials, as described by Ingold, that the works themselves contain (Figure 50).

This meta-narrative moves through the states of textiles from raw materials, to the production of cloth or rope, to the function of the object, and then to its used, or post-consumer state. Unlike most other materials, there is an almost universal understanding of these stages of production and use. While the majority of homes never had a metal forge, and the average citizen might not know much about smelting, most homes had the means to make cloth until recently and there is still vestigial paraphernalia in the domestic landscape; a sewing machine, knitting needles, a needle and thread. The production of cloth is similar to the production and preparation of food; we have a basic understanding of the stages even if we are not farmers or cooks.

If we consider Morris and Abakanowicz’s work in this manner, the *Abakans* occupy a position near the top of the scale as they interrogate the position of handmade cloth in the latter half of the twentieth century, imagining brash possibilities for woven forms (Figure 51). The work of Morris, on the other hand, questions the already-made material itself, and continues the legacy of the Duchamp’s investigations, the *Felt Pieces* negotiating a space somewhere between the readymade and *3 Standard Stoppages*.

By considering works from these two loose groupings of practitioners on this unified schematic, categories of art or craft become less relevant, and instead we can see the works as different but analogous responses to their artistic and socio-economic contexts. Through a focus on the material, the meta-narrative allows for more nuanced investigations of both the shared sensibilities and the differences in approaches of these historical moments.

As Lange-Berndt reminds us, there is a political content in the selection and engagement of materials:

From a critical perspective, the term ‘material’ describes not prime matter but substances that are always subject to change[...] It is therefore a political decision to focus on the materials of art: it means to consider the processes of making, and their associated power relations, to consider the workers – whether they are in factories, studios or public spaces [...] and their tools and spaces of production. (2015:p. 12)

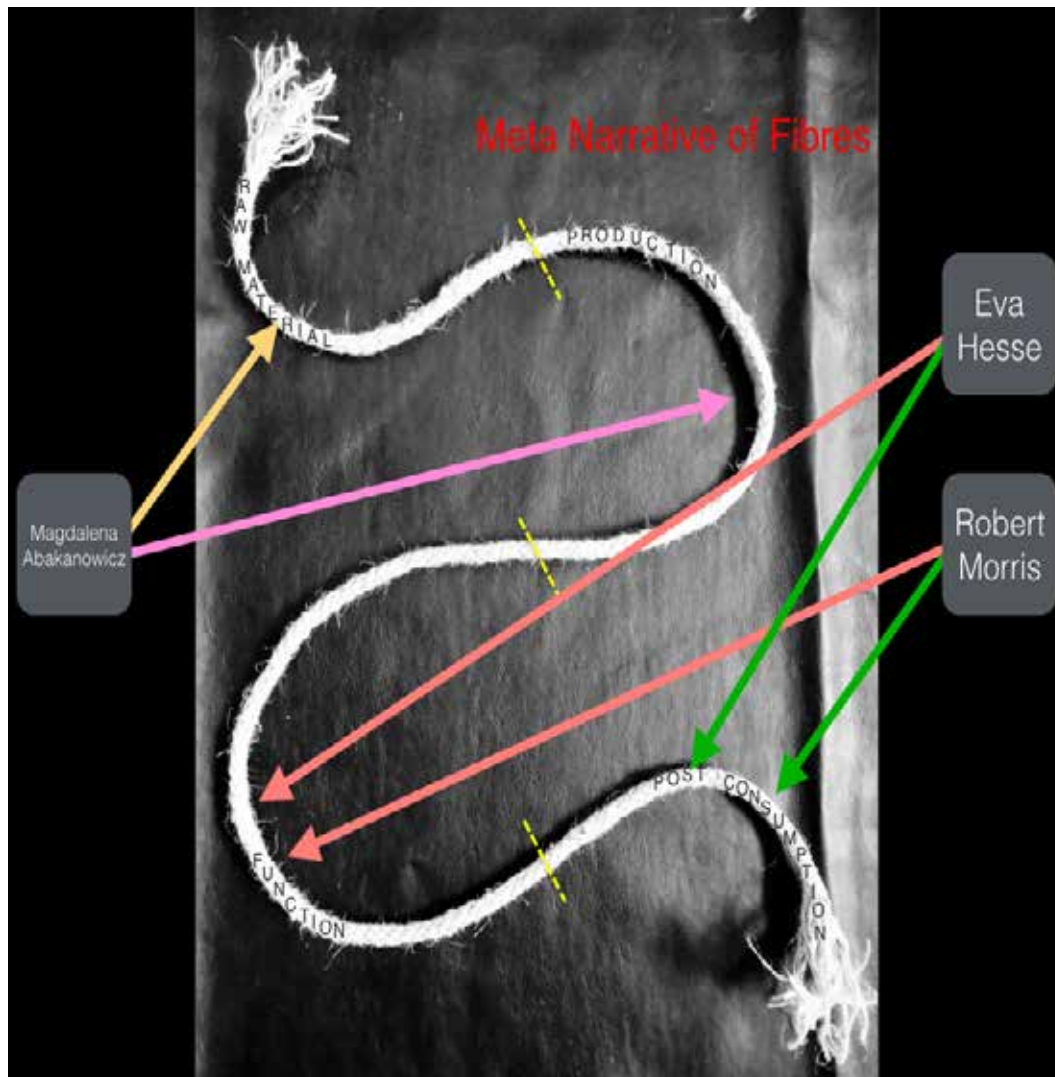


Figure 51: Meta Narrative of Materials

The methods and materials used by Morris and Abakanowicz, as well as their associated peers, draw attention to these contexts of production, using the textiles that surrounded them to demonstrate individual responses to their industrial environments.

Conclusions

While Penelope was weaving the shroud, neither the process of building it in the daytime or the process of unbuilding it at night was of greater importance. Each action enabled her to maintain a hard-won moment of autonomy and kept her in a relatively safe and static position within her own household. Penelope serves as a potent model for reconsidering the legacy of fibre and post-minimalist practices; these loose, and heterogeneous movements that also explored the methods corresponding to her actions; the craft-informed fibre artists finding new ways of knotting and weaving to construct radically new and strange forms, while on the flip side, Process Artists investigating collapse, waste and destruction. Each group explored agency using the material excesses at hand and exerted an individualistic autonomy within a post-war industrial landscape.

The artists who were able to most seamlessly translate an investigation of the properties of textiles with acceptance in the mainstream art world, particularly in New York City, were those practitioners like Morris, Oldenburg, and Tuttle, who had the advantages of being men educated within a fine art setting, and whose practices were able to respond to a climate where a multiplicity of materials and approaches were being used as a dialectical response to the narrowly defined specificity of Greenbergian modernism and a reappraisal of the methodologies of chance, chaos and the everyday as typified in Duchamp's practice.

Conversely, those artists, mostly women, often educated in a craft-informed programme, who operated at the 'production' end of the meta-narrative of material, presented additive, structural sculptural pieces made out of fibre into the Fine Art discourse of the moment. Instead of the post-minimalists who were able to 'soften' the material language of art from a central position, the tapestry and Fiber artists were working from an outside position and demanding that an entirely new means of creating work from a disregarded substance was accepted by a largely dismissive establishment. Their gender, materials processes, and divergence from the theoretical zeitgeists of the time made this near-impossible.

In one of the many aphorisms hiding in the dense thicket of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, he suggests a political potency in unravelling, or that "art's substance could be its transitoriness" (1997:p.4) and these mid-century experimentations of indeterminate tangled rope and piles of felt momentarily embody a criticality and subversion of the economic forces underpinning the art world. Cloth employed in a sculptural context during this moment altered the model of the timeless, static object and introduced the possibilities of both multiple positions, and of the impossibility of replicating

exact arrangements, disrupting its ability to be commodified. While it was not the only material capable of communicating these shifts, the combination of its unstable physical properties, along with its accessibility meant that it was both an affordable substance with which to experiment, and its quotidian quality set it apart from the high art materials of bronze and marble.



Figure 52: Breeze Block Pile II

The *Breeze Block Pile* works draw upon the process of both post-minimalist and fibre or tapestry artists in their construction.



Figure 53: Breeze Block Pile I and II

The language I use to describe them comprises of both the repetitive labour and tacit knowledge of one camp and the falling, piling, softness of the other.



Figure 54: Breeze Block Pile I and II

Also arising from an interest in chance arrangements and the unpredictable effects of gravity, these forms are tossed in the air and thrown to the ground again and again. The formations frozen through photography instead of Duchamp's varnish.



Figure 55: Thrown configuration with Breeze Block Pile I and II

The name a reference to both the pile of a rug, but also to the lump of the forms themselves, as they are heaped onto each other and amongst other soft form in the studio.



Figure 56: Breeze Block Pile I and II

A Little While Later

My cat was killed by a car and I left town. These two things aren't related, but they've meant that it's been a few days since I picked up my tool, and the wool, and the plastic canvas.

After the early rush of production, after the initial excitement, I wonder about this document, this bit of text. How it will capture the steady work, the tedium. How I can go back and edit it? How does that affect the truth of it? How important it is for me, and for you, that I am a reliable narrator?

The writing, this writing here, has to stop because I have to pick it all up again and I've forgotten how to do it. My fingers can still fold the wool pieces quickly and accurately, but pulling it in and out of the plastic canvas is awkward in a way that I can't recall it being a few days ago.

The plastic roughs up my hands, and as I write those words I remember that I had had the piece wedged into place on my desk, not just sitting loosely on my lap. This will help to keep it just elevated enough to stop abrading my skin.

We stop crying all the time and we get a new cat. He's the same colour scheme as this piece, mostly black but with specks of oatmeal grey. This colour coordination wasn't intentional, but it might point to a bias I have. When we get him he weighs barely more than one of the balls of yarn. I spend the first week and a half trying to fatten him up, bring him up to two balls' worth of weight, or 800g, so he can get his first shot.

My niece comes a short while later and we go out into the studio so she can draw and I can work. She tells me that the object would make a really great doormat and asks me if I can make one for her house.

"This? You want to wipe your feet on this thing that I've spent weeks and weeks making?"

"Yes! It would be a really nice one!"

I tell her it probably will end up on the floor; I like it on the floor, and I throw it down so that the wool splays out all around, and then she jumps right on it, and she doesn't understand why fear and panic flash across my face. I don't really either; she hasn't harmed it.

She asks me what it is. I say it's a sculpture. She asks me why I'm making it; I can't come up with an answer that satisfies either of us.

I read this: "If we give the attributes of a medium to the artist, we must deny him the state of consciousness on the esthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it. All his decisions in the artistic execution of the work rest with pure intuition and cannot be translated into a self-analysis, spoken or written, or



Figure 57: Breeze Block Pile I

even thought out.”¹

This feels extreme, and outdated in its modernity and also like this precise state I find myself in as my niece stares at me, expecting more. I tell her: "I have to wait until I finish it to know what it is and how I feel or think about it."

My position is the same as hers; I have no special insight to offer up.

Instead of talking about it, I get on with wrapping the yarn around the ruler, and she watches me, and then asks to try, too. She's quickly bored and frustrated. I try to show her ways to make it easier and rhythmic: pull off great lengths of wool from the ball so that it's loose and ready. Hold the ruler parallel to the floor so the lengths don't fall off as you wrap.

She's not interested in carrying on. She tells me how boring it is. Obviously I can't disagree, but I explain that it's a kind of boredom that I find interesting, or relaxing, or soothing and so it doesn't bother me. Just like she finds adding tiny, repetitive details to her drawings to be interesting and necessary, when it would make me itchy and mad with anxiety. She's incredulous; her drawings amount to something. The detail indicates her skill; she's very good at art. I'm just wrapping wool around a ruler and I don't even know why.

Finally, I take my sharp scissors and slice across the hundreds of strands in thick, dense cuts. She's transfixed by the sound and says that next time she visits, she'll get her father, the sound engineer, to make a recording. She brings up the sound repeatedly over the next few days and we talk about how it was different from the sound of cut hair, or cloth, or plastic. I tell her how much I love the sound, too.

I ordered three more balls of yarn and I hope they'll be enough to finish it off. I've started to work with different lengths of yarn to moderate how it sits on the floor, to create undulations and an unsettled object. As I've introduced shorter lengths into the process, the balls of yarn are stretching a little further. I'm now pretty sure that I was missing a decimal point in my initial calculation that suggested I needed 68 balls of yarn. Five balls should just about do it now.

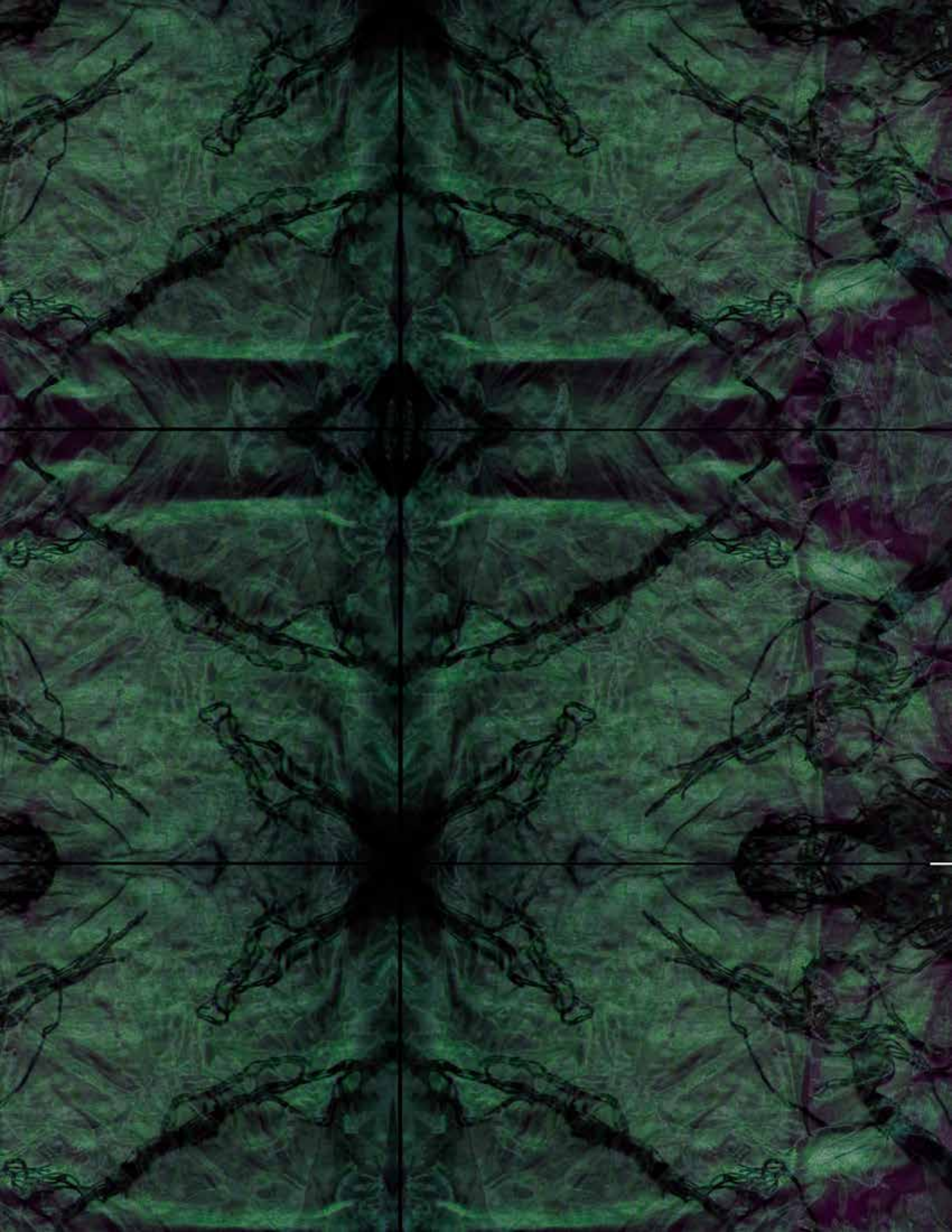
It continues to take ages to make. It could take up all of my time and I have to demonstrate activity and progress and tangible results during this period of PhD research. So I restrict work on it to after 3 PM, the time of day when no new thoughts are likely to happen; when the best of my writing is behind me, and I can sit and knot these endless strands of yarn without guilt, sinking back into that space beyond writing, beyond thinking, beyond knowing.

The work will not be ready in time for my next progression review. It will still be an unknown and I will still be ignorant about it.

1 Marcel Duchamp (1975) 'The Creative Act' quoted in *The Duchamp Book*, Simon Parkinson, 2008. London: Tate Publishing.

The background is a complex, abstract texture. It features a central black crosshair that divides the image into four quadrants. The overall color palette is dominated by dark green and deep purple, with lighter, almost white, areas that create a sense of depth and movement. The texture appears to be composed of many fine, overlapping lines and shapes, giving it a organic, almost cellular quality. The word "Space" is centered in the middle of the image, in a clean, white, sans-serif font.

Space



An Instability of Space

Part 1 - A Man Escaped

That the condemned protagonist eventually escapes prison is a detail revealed in the title of Robert Bresson's 1956 film, *A Man Escaped* or: *The Wind Bloweth Where it Listeth* (*Un condamné à mort s'est échappé ou le vent souffle où il veut*). And although the ending is foretold, the tension lies in just how Fontaine, a French resistance fighter awaiting execution, manages to subvert the walls of both his cell and the prison by using a succession of objects that he creates thanks to a piece of string. Fontaine exposes his enclosure as an ecology of tools where every item can contain the key to release, particularly cloth. This instrumentalised terrain allows him to reconfigure the architecture of the prison; creating pathways where there were previously just sheer walls and precipitous drops. Fontaine illustrates the manner in which the smallest shreds of cloth and fragments of rope can create an instability in the stayed architecture of power.

This first object, a piece of string thrown up through the bars of Fontaine's window into his still-cuffed hands by another sympathetic inmate, is tied to the corners of a handkerchief creating a makeshift basket. By raising and lowering it to the courtyard below, he can send letters to his family and smuggle in a safety pin capable of springing his handcuffs. This initial liberation enables the prisoner to gradually breach successive boundaries, and simultaneously gain a better understanding of the prison's architecture. He determines that he needs to create rope and hooks in order to drop down towering walls, and monkey climb between two high barriers. Unravelling the wire mesh of his bed frame, and ripping his blankets into long strips, he twists the materials together to make a strong and flexible length. His earlier letters to his family have brought a suitcase full of clothing, and these are cut up as well. In a prison where even pencils are forbidden, the tools of escape have to be as innocuous as possible. If the guards had found his lengthening rope, there would have been trouble, but the raw materials of his escape could be stuffed into a mattress, becoming soft and amorphous again, flying under the radar. Through this small accretion of inconsequential fibres, an arsenal of tools were created.

In his review of the film for *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1956, Eric Rohmer described Fontaine's tale as 'a miracle of objects' (p.43). This lovely phrase is frequently taken out of context and removed from the religious ideology that both Rohmer and Bresson espoused. For Rohmer, this miracle demonstrated the predestined nature of the prisoner's life; that God, through his mysterious and confounding ways, provides us with precisely the materials needed to survive.

A more secularist view could understand a different miracle in the objects created by Fontaine; an incredible resourcefulness that demonstrates why string and rope were amongst the first technologies invented by humans. When Fontaine takes a twisted length of cloth and wraps the wire around it in the opposite direction, twisting the two strands, holding the end in tension under his

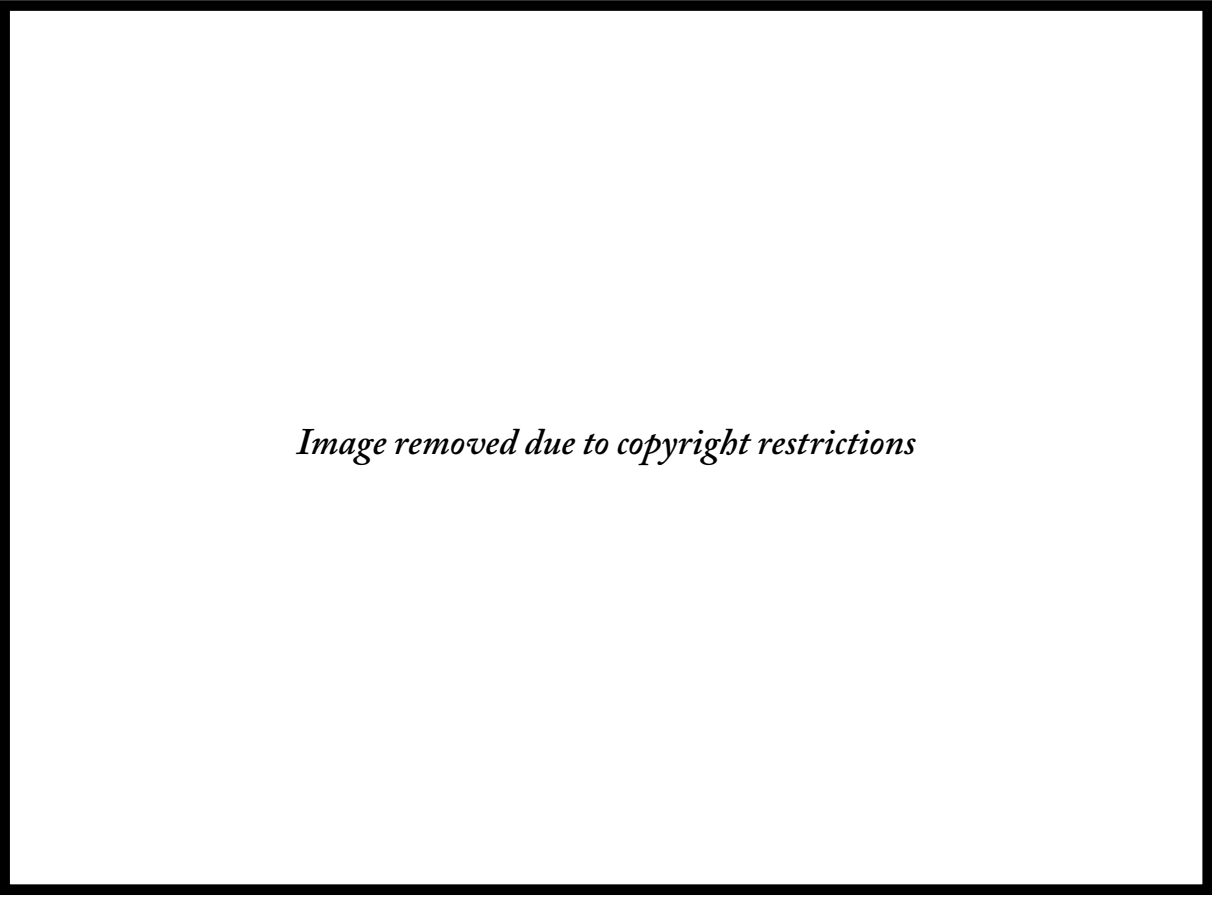


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*Figure 58: Robert Bresson, *A Man Escaped*, 1956*

foot, he replicates the methods used to make the earliest versions of rope, bending the world to our un-divine will by twisting plant fibres together to form long lengths as early as 15,000 BCE (Wayland Barber, 1994:p.51).

Fontaine's true story echoes Ariadne and the maze; when one woven length of rope was enough for Theseus to escape from the Minotaur. In this version, Fontaine becomes both Ariadne and Theseus; he is at once the escapee and the maker of his own release. Fontaine leaves his rope and hooks slung across the chasm of the prison walls as a silent declaration of his methods, readily visible should the guards decide to look up and notice this soft intervention.

To a contemporary eye, there is a familiarity to the objects Fontaine hoists across his shoulder as he flees; they are resonant in their intent, and also in their manner of construction, their exploitation of the everyday (Figure 58). His coiled rope and wire-wrapped hooks could easily have found their place on the wall of Eva Hesse's studio. The dissection of the building with rope reminiscent of the works of Daniel Buren, Magdalena Abakanowicz or Francoise Grossen. These are tent-like strategies; nomadic, flexible, personal in nature.

In her book *Minor Architectures*, Jill Stoner establishes the subversive nature of 'minor architectures' or small shifts in how we use and conceptualise the physical structures of our environment that can upset the dominant power dynamic. She describes them as "opportunistic events in response to latent but powerful desires to undo structures of power; and as such, minor architectures are precisely [...] concerned with the privilege and circumstances of major architecture, the architecture of State and economic authority" (2012;p.7). Fontaine creates just such a work of Minor Architecture when he throws his rope across the high walls of the prison.

In the examples that follow, cloth is frequently used outside of the gallery to exploit its quiet power to temporarily modify the dynamics of the built environment. The shifting of a flag from high mast to low. The banners of suffragettes and miners and sectarians changing the politics of the streets as they pass through. Fabric is a curious material in an urban setting because it feels too fragile and vulnerable to contend with the mountainous heaps of concrete, cut stone, and glass. And yet, the inherent flexibility and portability of the material means that it can be readily employed for temporary actions in these spaces.

Part 2 - The Joint Histories of Architecture and Textiles

In Gottfried Semper's seminal text, *The Four Elements of Architecture* (1870-73), the German architect and historian, makes a case for the prehistoric relationship between architecture and cloth. Taking an anthropological approach, he delineated four basic elements that continue to form the basis of our buildings; the hearth, roof, enclosure and the mound. Semper postulated that architectural enclosures have the same origin as weaving; early humans used poles in the earth around

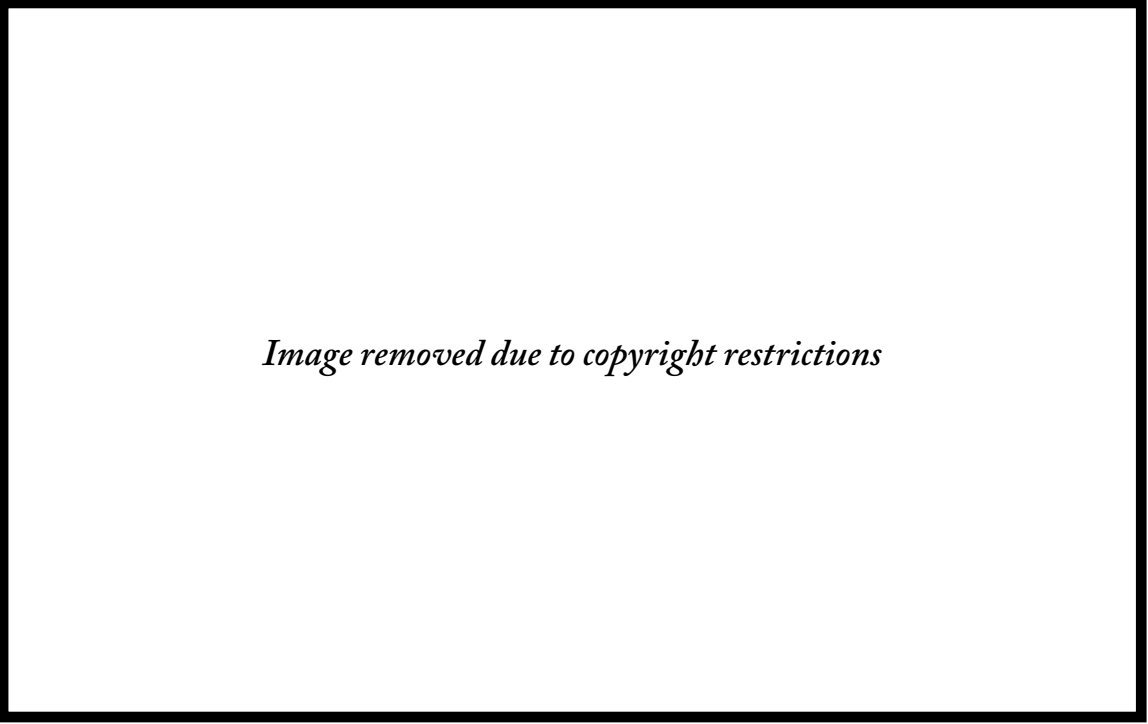


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*Figure 59: Ernesto Neto, *TorusMacroCopula*, 2012*

which to wrap flexible materials, akin to a warp and weft, building impermeable walls. (Houze 2006)

If the smooth walls of contemporary gallery spaces alienate us from the early origins of construction, the exaggerated scale of Ernesto Neto's crocheted net structures draw us back to these links (Figure 59). Comprised of pendulous orbs and suspended pathways through gallery spaces, the structures often enable viewers to climb into them, offering new vantage points and physical positions in which to occupy, move and rest. These installations harken back to Faith Wilding's *Crocheted Environment* (1972), originally part of *Womanhouse*, which demonstrated the potential for the simple act of crochet and balls of Woolworth's acrylic sweetheart yarn¹ to transform a room into something baroquely visceral, strange and simultaneously embracing.²

The weaver and theorist Anni Albers also connects building and weaving in her essay *The Pliable Plane: Textiles in Architecture* from 1957. She writes: "If the nature of architecture is the grounded, the fixed, the permanent, then textiles are its very antithesis. If, however, we think of the process of building and the process of weaving and compare the work involved, we will find similarities despite the vast difference in scale." (2001:p.44)

Albers pinpoints the perceptual tensions in our relationship to cloth and the built environment. The macro landscape that seems permanent, fixed, and dependable, and the micro cloth, this material that we see shift and fold and as it covers our bodies. This perceived disparity was exploited by Fontaine; how could the guards have known that shreds of cloth could breach the walls? Artists have used this dynamic to remind us that the physical structures we see around us are never as infallible as they seem.

As Abakanowicz moved away from making her *Abakans*, she started to leave the rope intact and used it to weave through buildings instead. In 1972 she pierced the Richard Demarco Gallery during the Edinburgh Festival with great columns of fibre, wrapped in a layer of cloth that was possibly protective, possibly confounding, and that travelled through the corridors and out of the windows of the building, suggesting alternative paths in the space, possible routes of escape and exploration. She wrote:

The gallery space was not large enough to show all the works I had brought over. So sitting and thinking, suddenly I saw Edinburgh as a monumental city. I looked at the façade of the Demarco Gallery and I thought I would bring the rope through it and into the gallery and out again through the window. It disappeared on top of the building. Then it reappeared on Edinburgh Cathedral [...]; from the top of the cathedral

1 Wilding has demonstrated loyalty and an interest in historical fidelity by using the same yarn in replicating this work in contemporary exhibitions like ICA Boston's *Fibre: Sculpture 1960-Present* and *Art_Textiles* at the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester in 2015.

2 *Womanhouse* in turn was influenced by the vast installations of *Abakans* shown just prior to this at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1971. (Inglot 2004;p.66)

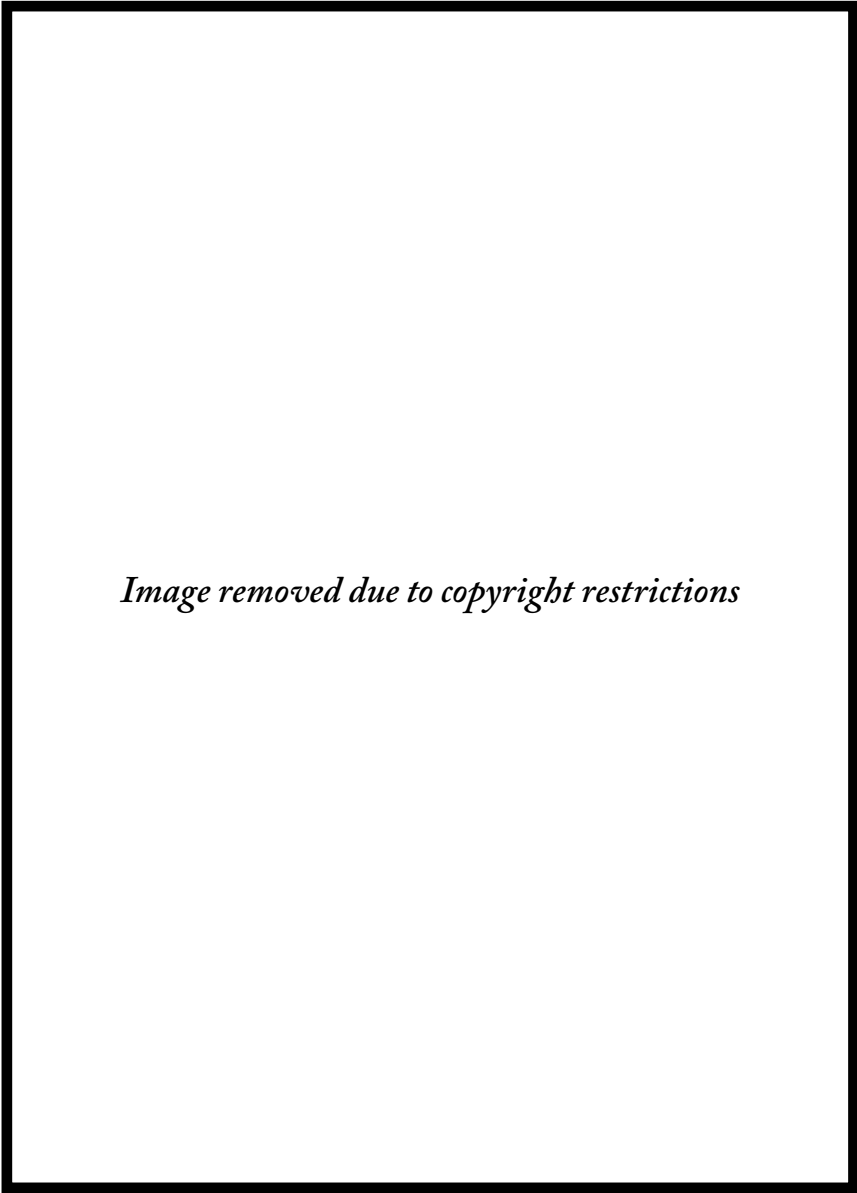


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*Figure 60: Daniel Buren, *Within and Beyond the Frame*, 1973*

it went to the chapter house, and then from the chapter house in a straight line to the garden, and then it disappeared. The rope could be seen from many angles from a long way off, and so the environment created by the rope seemed to get larger and larger.
(Abakanowicz, 1982)

The rope changed the building from a static immutable mass, to one that can be penetrated, challenging viewers to question their assumptions about the buildings they move through, just as much as it subverts the potentiality of the rope itself; an object shifted from a fibrous tool, to a tenuous passageway.

Within and Beyond the Frame (1973), Daniel Buren's early intervention at John Weber Gallery in New York, also demonstrates the position of cloth in the urban environment as existing between something disruptive, and something permissible (Figure 60). The striped panels echoing laundry lines of drying clothing, similarly expanded the territory of the gallery. But as they were so clearly temporary, it was a permitted occupation. Like the environments set up by Oldenburg in the previous decade, this piece continues to show the white cube gallery space as permeable to the everyday, not only through its use of lowly cloth, but by openly occupying the space beyond the gallery; signalling the possibilities for art beyond white-walled strictures. The nineteen sheets were arranged so that nine were inside and nine were outside, and the central panel was positioned in the middle of the window; the casing removed for the duration of the exhibition, creating a new opening and vulnerability in the building.

Again, precedents for these textile incursions into space can be drawn from the earlier work of Duchamp. His contribution to the 1937 *International Surrealist Exhibition* in Paris was to create a darkened grotto space through cladding the gallery in 1200 suspended coal sacks and giving visitors torches to help them navigate the space and view the works. When tumultuous events of the following years saw a great number of Surrealists escaping the German occupation of France and relocating to New York, the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism* was organised there in 1942. In this iteration, Duchamp strung up 16 miles of white string around and through the space, among the works, across the passageways. As visitors had to navigate these thin but pervasive physical barriers, there were conflicting reports as to whether the string served to focus the attention on the pieces themselves, or whether it was only a frustration (Filipovic, 2009). This installation is sometimes called 'his twine' in reference to the title page of the accompanying catalogue that states "hanging by Andre Breton, his twine Marcel Duchamp". In thinking about the installation, the 'his' in the title could allude to the ownership of the string by Duchamp, his twine is his intervention. In the context of the catalogue however, the 'his' could allude to Breton, the dynamic suggesting Breton as the orderly controller and Duchamp, his unpredictable, mutable maverick, his twisting piece of string.

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Figure 61: Lucy Orta, Refuge Wear, 1992-93

Part 3 – Strategies of Tents and Strategies of Pavilions

The impermanent, mobile potentialities of cloth, outside of the gallery and immersed in the built environment manifest as tents; flexible and nomadic, temporarily switching a site from its former use to a place of rest, expression, or protest. Translated into an art tactic, the tent-trope evokes a momentary shifting of space. As Albers continues to think about the early human uses of textiles, she notes that the flexibility and portability of cloth enabled humans to both create mobile shelters, and protective clothing enabling the development of roaming and responsive patterns; characteristics that “made us independent of place, hour and season” (2001:p.45).

In considering the divergent ways these thematics have been taken up in artistic practices, the tent garments of Lucy Orta dating from the 1990s could be considered in relation to the earlier *Parangolés* created by Hélio Oiticica in 1964-65.

Orta created a series of wearble tents in the 1990s that directly linked survival, architecture and garments, and that she developed through interactions with homeless individuals (Figure 61). The resulting works were made out of high performance textiles bristling with advanced technologies and are highly polished and aestheticized objects suitable for the commercial gallery settings where they were designated, and not intended to be worn by the individuals that had partially inspired their creation. Instead they approached shelterless-ness as a metaphoric condition, and Orta’s work enacts a distanced response to crisis removed from the provisional, inelegant solutions marking real-world homelessness.

Oiticica’s *Parangolés* also developed through his interactions with a particular community, specifically, residents of one of Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, Mangueira Hill, where he started to regularly attend the samba school and work with the dancers (Figure 62). The *Parangolés* were devised as layers of tents, capes, banners and flags, bespoke to the individuals that inspired them and described by the artist as “habitable paintings”. These works are activated once worn; in her 2004 article Anna Dezeuze describes the experience of donning one of these capes decades later:

Any attempt to document the experience of wearing a Parangolé stumbles on the problem that a single photograph is insufficient to capture the temporal process of discovery which it requires. Lifting the cape, turning my head, moving my body, I can relish the contrasting bright colors, touch the rough green fabric and the soft cotton cloth, and compare its two sides. I can pull out the long piece of gauze from a pocket in the cape and read the words on it, hold it up in front of my face like a semitransparent mask, or use it as a kind of shroud to cover parts of my body. (60)

As this passage describes, there are multiple positions and arrangements possible in each garment; they require a human body not only to animate the cloth, but also to choose the precise arrange-

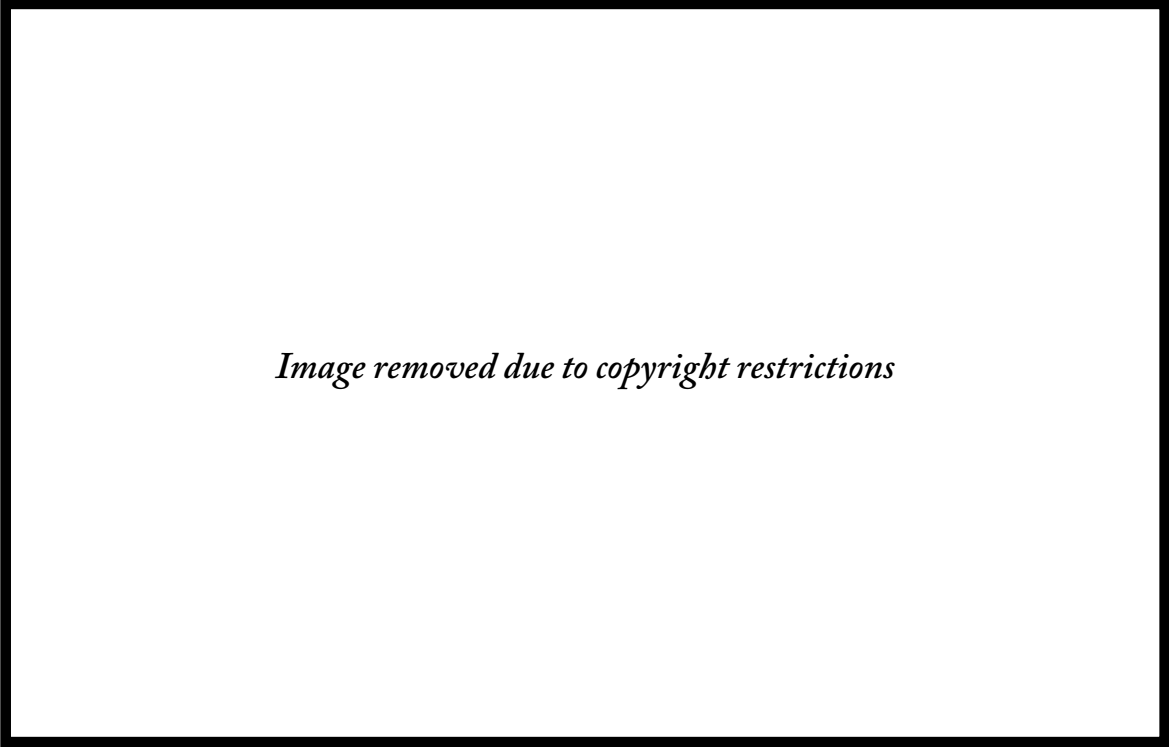


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Figure 62: Helio Oiticica, Parangolé, P4 Cape 1, 1964

ment and use of the cloth. There is no prescriptive function for the layers, flaps and pockets, so the pieces remain unpredictable as they are animated by the wearer who in turn animates the street in the bright, billowing layers of cloth. In 1965, Oiticica organised a parade of the *Parangolés*-clad dancers to the Museum of Modern Art in Rio, intending them to take over the gallery spaces where his works were being shown. The Museum refused entry to the dancers, and they occupied the exterior spaces instead (Dezeuze 2004), this frustrated action still transforming the immediate area and enacting the kind of democratised, interactive politics that characterised the Brazilian Neoconcrete movement, of which Oiticica was a key member.

Jeremy Deller's 2001 re-enactment of the 1984 *Battle of Orgreave*, similarly used the transformative power of clothing by dressing hundreds of former miners and actors in period costume, temporarily shifting the town from 2001 to events seventeen years earlier. The work was transient and evaporated as soon as the actors removed their 1980s garments and put away their banners, dissolving the historical anger and rage that was ephemerally brought back to the surface.

Orta and Oiticica's wearable tents, separated by decades and an ocean, illuminate the ways in which this flexible structure can either function as disruptor or reifier. Oiticica's tents, activated by their individual wearers and in turn activating their performative space, served to highlight the implicit privileges of the gallery in their denial of entry, and their wider position as inhabitants of a favela, while also designating the street as a potent site of art-making. Orta's tents, sitting within the gallery, unoccupied, operate on a metaphoric level of migration or homelessness, but remain untouched and inert in their pristine condition. Oiticica's *Parangolés* give the wearer a temporary and jubilant structure in which to subvert the stayed order of the city, while Orta's work confirms the existence of the homeless as those shut out of the gallery, and shut out of these tents.

In her book discussing the rise of site-specific works, Miwon Kwon cautions against an all too common romanticisation of the nomadic within contemporary art practices given the power dynamics involved. An easy flexibility and freedom of movement often indicates significant economic and political privilege, while an imposed migration and the loss of a home can indicate the extreme subjugation and terror, evidence of which abounds in our contemporary political moment (2002:p.160). Artist Helen Storey recently illustrated this perilous dynamic through her piece *Dress for Our Time* (2016) that created a vast, billowing dress from a decommissioned UN tent, previously used to shelter a family, and projected onto its surface an animated landscape 80,000 of red dots, each one representing 100 people, that actively demonstrated the enforced pathways of global migration and brought the scale of the crisis into the gallery space and onto a human body. (Arthur, 2016)

The strategy of the disruptive tent can manifest in structures that move beyond the physical dimensions of the human body to become monumentally scaled. From the post-war period, there has been an entangling of art and architectural practices, particularly as alternative spaces, often

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Figure 63: Dan Graham, *Pavilion Sculpture for Argonne*, Documenta 13, 1978-81

former industrial sites, become art spaces, and as palatial, purpose built art centres multiplied. Or, if we follow Curtis' assertion that the autonomy of sculpture from architecture is a modern phenomenon, then this is a renegotiation of an old relationship. Hal Foster (2013) notes that this impulse is characterised by architects producing image-structures that can function as graphic, tourist-friendly, iconography, and artists shaping spaces in these vast new chambers. For example, he contrasts Norman Foster's *Great Court* and the British Museum, or Herzog and de Meuron's *Switch House* extension to Tate Modern with the monumental space-splicing constructions of Richard Serra. However, these artist incursions often reinforce the existing systems and structures, particularly through the trope of the 'art pavilion'. If the tent-strategy developed as a subversive response to the built environment, the art pavilion conversely operates as a diverting, decorative, adjunct to the major architectures of the established institutions and a reinforcement of the power structures operating within these same sites.

Pavilions descend from a different lineage of construction to those of tents; as the most prolific contemporary creator of Art Pavilions, Dan Graham explains:

In Western culture the pavilion placed in a park setting began with the Renaissance garden, where it was often used for Disney-like special effects. In the 19th Century it grew in size into the Crystal Palace of the 1851 World's Exposition in London. It now encompasses the quasi-utilitarian modern "non-place" bus shelter and telephone booth. (1999:p.174)

But Pavilions do not shift or expand the possibilities of space in the same manner as tents. Beginning with his earliest installation at Documenta 13 (Figure 63), Graham's Pavilions have been consistently created for the site and not the user. Despite his contention that the works are only activated when people are within and around them, they are antiseptic spaces of controlled movement and activity intended to be in place for an unquestioned duration.³ People may activate the pavilions, but the pavilions do not activate the people. While Graham's characteristic experiments with transparent and reflective glass purportedly democratizes the ubiquitous one-way sight of corporate architecture, his later, fully-transparent Pavilions replicate the architectural forms of high capitalism and leave little for the visitor to do but walk through the space.

The archetypal inert pavilion is the reconstruction of Mies van der Rohe's *Barcelona Pavilion* (Figure 64). Originally built as the German Pavilion for the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona, it was torn down a year later and then reconstructed by local Catalan architects in the early 1980s. At the time of the first construction, van der Rohe distinguished his pavilion from the bombastic nationalism of other countries by designing a space of cool materials, comfortable seating, interesting sightlines and luxurious materials. The near-empty space, adorned only with

³ Permanent in this context referring to a structure that is meant to form a lasting part of a landscape, or a structure that remains unchanged for the duration of a festival. In either situation, a visitor will experience the same fixed space regardless of when they visit. There is no expectation of shifting or nod to temporal slippages. The visitor is encouraged to think of these spaces as permanent.

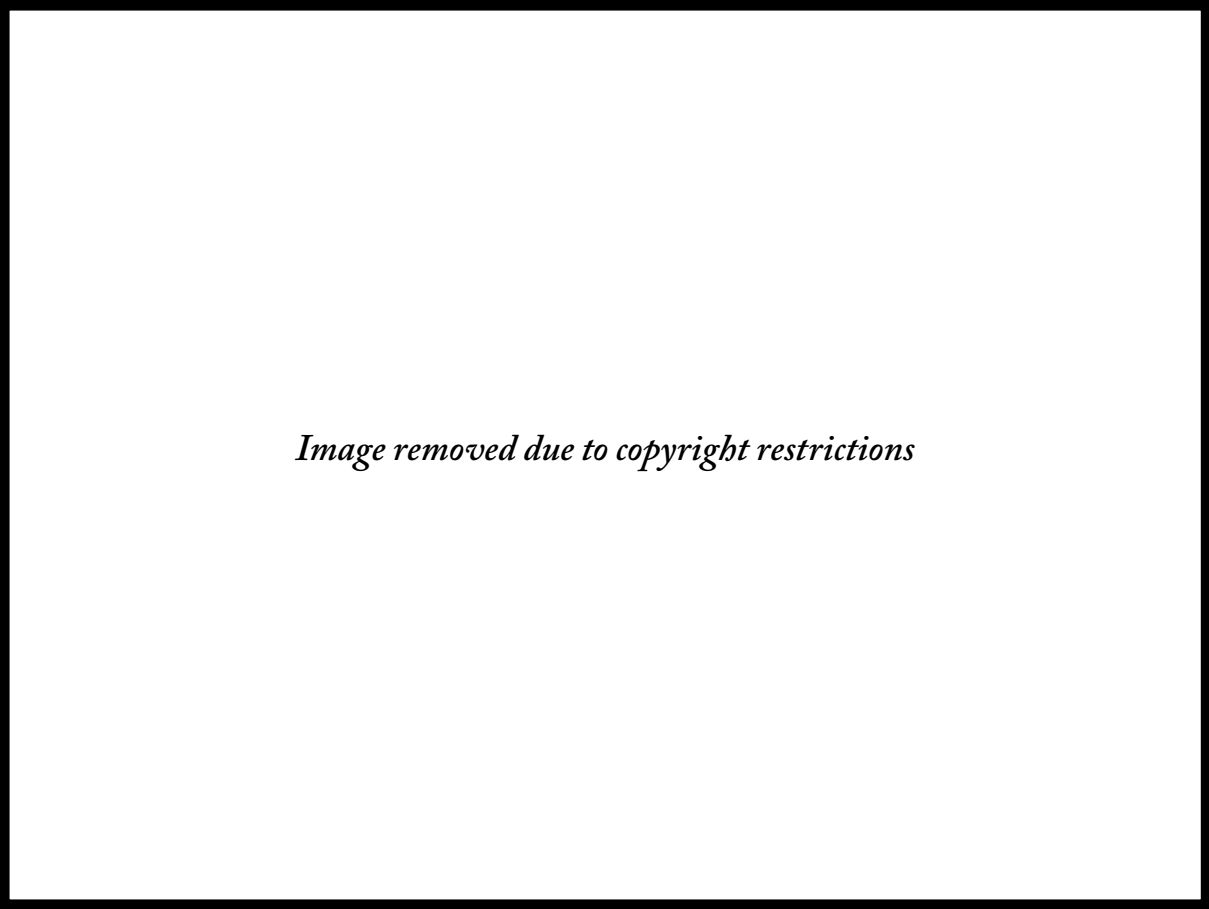


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Figure 64: Mies Van Der Rohe, Barcelona Pavilion, 1929/1983,

Georg Kolbe's sculpture *Alba* located in one of the water basins, was intended as a resting place from the overwhelming activity of the Exposition, an oasis for visitors in the midst of their voyage through the rest of the festival.

In its resurrection, the pavilion shifts from being a place of calm contemplation en route, to a tourist destination in itself, accessible only through a steep admission fee. While the space still demonstrates the elegance of the original design and the intriguing interplay of materials and planes, the generosity of the initial concept has been replaced by a cynical fetishizing. Like the Pavilions of Dan Graham, Victor Pasmore's revived *Apollo Pavilion* in Peterlee,⁴ or the Serpentine's Pavilion programme, the visitor is left with little to do in these small spaces but briefly stand within them, often after a long pilgrimage. They replicate an experience of a medieval cathedral with only the most dubious promises of cultural salvation offered in return.

These Art Pavilions are not disqualified from the tactics of tents just in their choice of hard, vitreous material; the use of cloth in a public setting does not equate to a disruption of the manifested power structures. Jean Claude and Christo's monumental public wrappings evoke an event of metamorphosis, an obscuring of an iconic structure that imparts a temporal character to an otherwise seemingly permanent urban landscape. However, this is not a transformation that activates or subverts the power structures already embedded in the city. The citizens do not gain a different relation to the cloaked building, or access to different modes of using familiar spaces.⁵ The wrapped buildings, or flags adorning the pathways of parks, are temporary spectacles that leave their sites untroubled and unchallenged when they are removed. They open neither a spatial discourse nor an imaginative territory.

Much like their earlier incursions into the landscape, these works function as hubristic blockings of access. Great cloths swept across canyons or drawn around islands privilege a distant, photographic view and not the ecosystem or intimate visitor to the site. They are an embodiment of power and a gesture of ego as works that are impressive for the administrative and bureaucratic might that manifest in equal proportions to their physical mass. Christo's egoism is signalled in the earliest works of his career, now collected under the title "Wrapped Objects, Statues and Women" on the artists' website.

4 The Apollo Pavilion (1969) is the sculptural focal point within the the Sunny Blunts Estate in Peterlee. Designed by Victor Pasmore, the artist and architect who acted as a Consulting Director for the housing development, it originally provided a pathway over the water feature, and was imagined as a utopic space for community gatherings, but instead became a site for "anti-social behaviour." As the structure was never able to function within the community as designed, it fell into disrepair, had its staircases removed rendering it functionless, and was used for plantings. Following a prolonged campaign to have the structure listed (finally granted in 2011), funding was secured to return it to its original state. The structure is now back to its nearly pristine white state (when the author visited in 2014 it had been embellished with graffiti), but only one set of stairs was restored. Visitors can climb up to the platform, look around the open, empty space, and come back the way they came. (www.apollopavilion.info)

5 An exception to this is Christo and Jeanne-Claude's latest work, *The Floating Piers* (2016), where bright yellow pathways across the Italian lake were created to give visitors new ways of travelling across the water, albeit in a way still very much prescribed by the artists. (Although Jeanne-Claude passed away in 2009, she is still credited in this piece as it was conceived jointly in 1970)

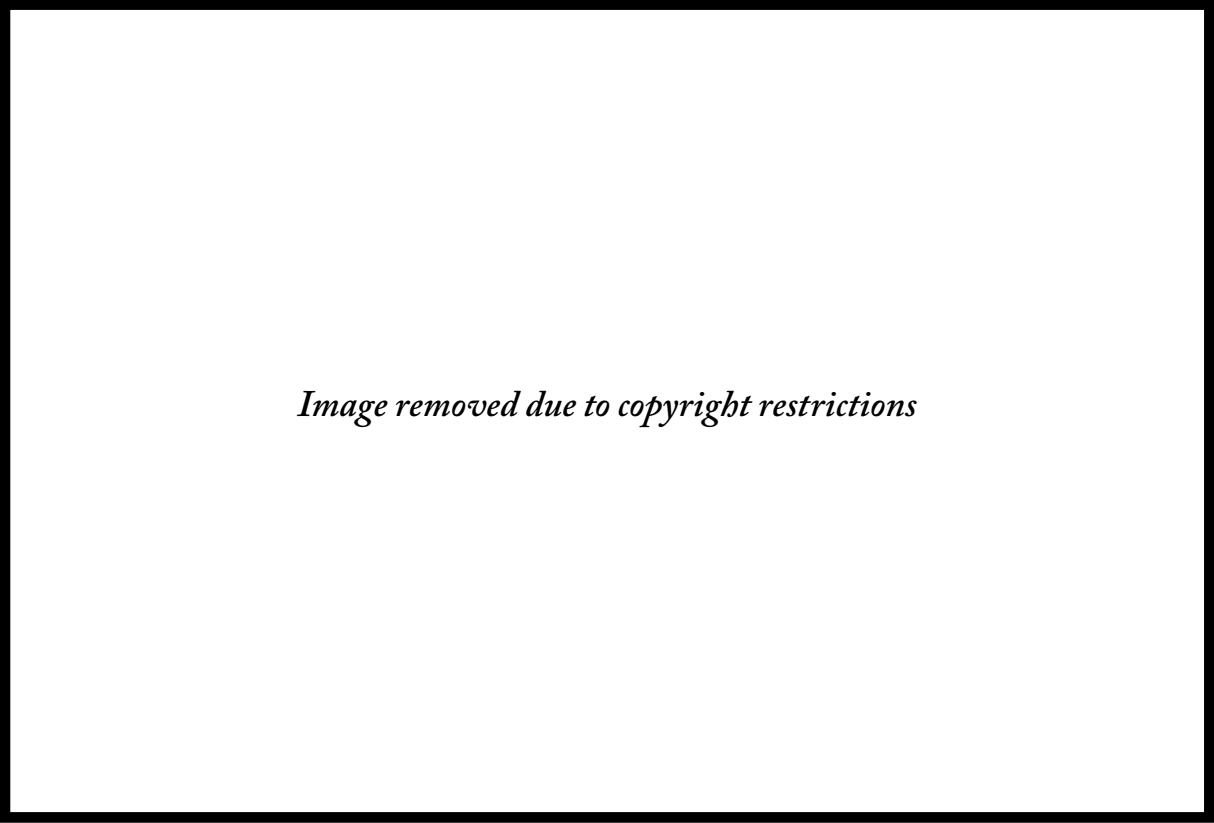


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Figure 65: Ann Hamilton, the event of a thread, 2012-13

If considered in relation to Ann Hamilton's 2012 work *the event of a thread* (a title taken from Albers' description of weaving), where a diaphanous white curtain attached to a myriad of levers and pulleys is drawn up and down by visitors swinging on swings throughout the space, the cloth enables the viewer to experience a shifting and unpredictable environment, partially of their own making (Figure 65). Alongside this simple motion, Hamilton created a community of curious and poetic actions including day-long readings to caged pigeons, a singer to serenade the birds as they were released in the evening, the song captured on vinyl and played the next morning, and a writer documenting the atmosphere of the transformed hall. Participants experienced fragments of this lyrical happening, but also the direct child-like thrill of flying through the space on their swing, pushing and pulling the central swath of diaphanous fabric through their motions.

The flexible ability of cloth to make communal spaces is also exploited by Janet Echelman's large urban textile installation including, *Skies Painted with Unnumbered Sparks* (2014), and *1.8*, installed in London's Oxford Circus in January 2016. Echelman uses advanced fibres of incredible strength to knot colourful nets and uses the full arsenal of contemporary tools to promote and fund the works from crowd-sourcing to TED talks. She explains that 1.8 refers to the "length of time in microseconds that the earth's day was shortened as a result of a physical event, the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that emanated from Japan" (2016). Interested in rendering visible the patterns of the physical world to viewers in the insulated consumerist bubble of central London, the work, like her other installations, allowed audience participation through an app on their phones; in the evening, participants could select the colours and patterns projected on the web giving them both a responsive spectacle, and, in the artist's words an opportunity for "visitors to feel more connected to those around them". (2006)

The works of Echelman and Hamilton use these vast swaths to hold a mobile and ever-changing population, uniting them briefly for a moment, allowing them to alter and play in their soft surroundings, and then accepting that they will move along, perhaps with an expanded imaginative perspective of how we can live within and shape the spaces around us.

Part 4 – Soft Activations of Imagined Spaces

Rope and cloth have the ability to not only reconfigure the physical spaces in which they find themselves, but also our perceptual understanding of exhibition spaces; The exterior of the gallery walls do not need to be physically penetrated in order for the space itself to be perceptually altered.

In an early work of Maurizio Cattelan, *Una Domenica a Rivara*, (1992), a series of twelve bed sheets knotted together, created an escape route out of the window of the top floor of the gallery and appears initially to mimic one of Fontaine's first attempts to escape from prison. Although like

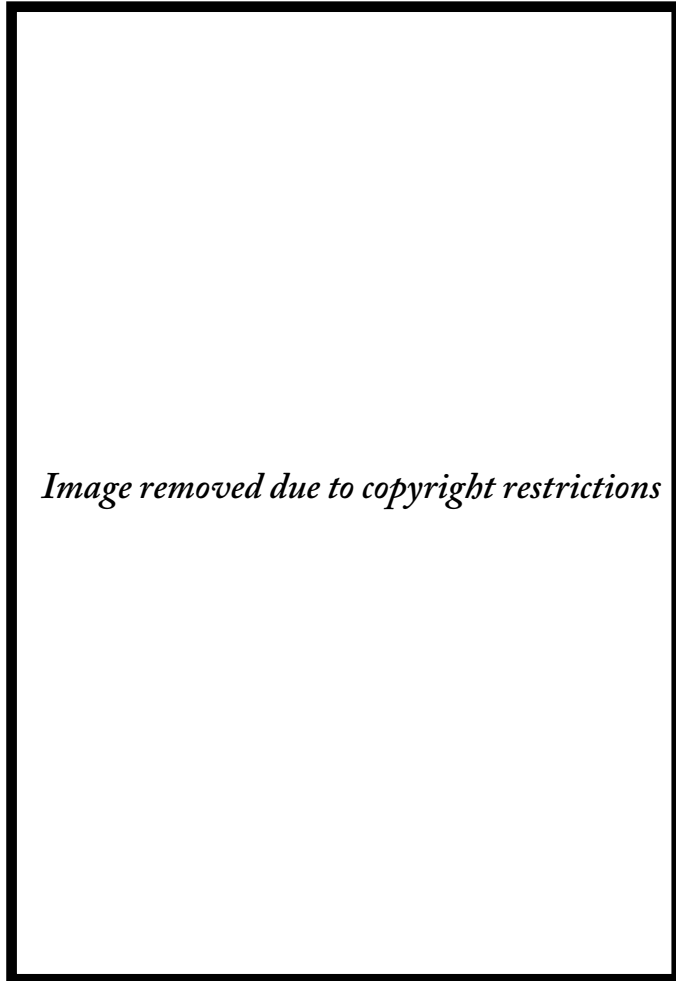


Figure 66: Maurizio Cattelan, *All*, 2011

the work of Abakanowicz and Buren, the cloth presents the viewer with another route through the architectural space, this work is less about physically escaping that particular building, and instead emblematic of an anxious relationship to the pressures of the exhibition itself and a participation in the art world (Manacorda, 2006).

Cattelan's uneasiness with the art world (whether genuine, or a prank, or an amalgam of the two) reached its apogee in his career retrospective at New York's Guggenheim Museum in 2011, through another textile-based intervention titled *All* (Figure 66). Resisting the idea of a chronological presentation of his works, Cattelan instead hung nearly every work he had ever made from ropes of various heights hanging from the central ceiling oculus of the gallery.

The use of ropes presents the assembled objects in a state of uncertain peril. There is an appearance of risk for the pieces, an ever-present danger that the rope could snap and sculptures could tumble to the ground, smashing into the fountain below. There is also the implied risk to the viewers in the rotunda area of the ground floor; walking around with tonnes of work just above their heads. The rope activated the sculptures anew by requiring the artist to find ways of tying it around the objects in order to suspend them. Consider *Him*, Cattelan's infamous depiction of a small, kneeling Hitler. Often exhibited on its own in an empty room,⁶ his chest has now been bound multiple times; a binding that somehow takes into account biology and a human body. The rope at once further anthropomorphises the object while its placement in the hanging mass emphasises the figure's absurdity.

Although curators Nancy Spector and Katherine Brinson described the installation as "an exercise in disrespect" (2011), the use of rope to temporarily and provisionally display an entire oeuvre in the centre of the building is also a highly effective use of the idiosyncratic space. Within Frank Lloyd Wright's curvilinear walls and the slow, circular ramp, the sculptural works uniquely activated the space as viewers were permitted to consider them from a multitude of distances and angles. Cattelan's superficially disrespectful act can be understood as a sensitive response to the site. The use of rope subverts a museological and canonical reading of the works, temporarily disrupts the space, all the while drawing attention to the unique aspects of this construction.

This feeling of swaying danger also characterised Phyllida Barlow's installation *Dock* in the Duveen Galleries of Tate Britain in 2014 (Figure 67). Through a series of over-sized, immersive and seemingly shifting structures, bound forms of rags hung above the heads of the visitors. Barlow identifies the underlying psychological dynamics of our age as characterised by instability, particularly through the cataclysmic destruction of the World Trade Centre saying: "the absolute collapse of the ultimate phallogocentric object, and them coming down as though they were curt-seying. Unfortunately, it had a beauty about it, and how do you talk about that? It's too much isn't

⁶ This work was previously prominently featured in collector and curator Ydessa Hendeles' exhibition *The Teddy Bear Project*. Installed in her Toronto gallery in 2002, viewers encountered *Him* in a stark room, kneeling away from the audience after first walking through a room filled with 3000 anonymous family photographs taken between 1900 and 1940, each one featuring a teddy bear somewhere in the frame.

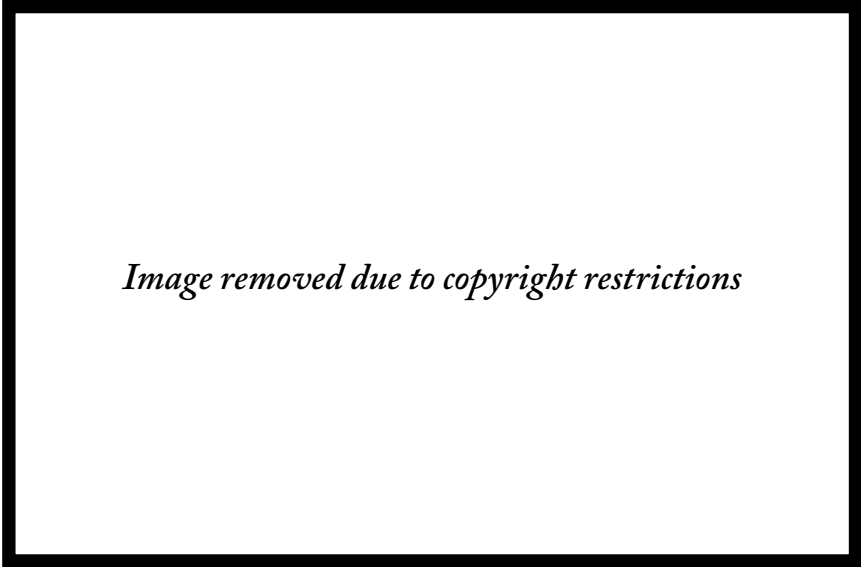


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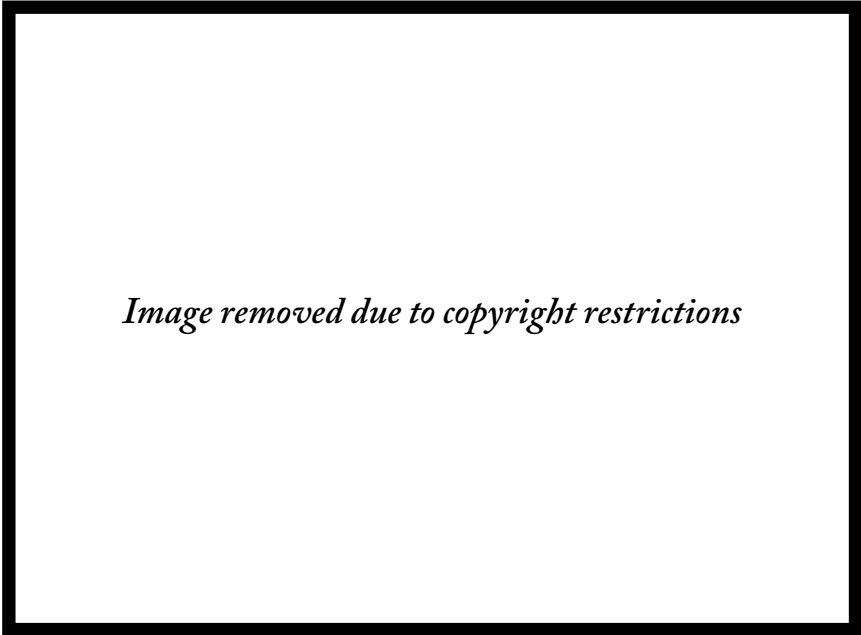


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Figure 67 (above): Phyllida Barlow, Dock, 2014

Figure 68 (below): Do Ho Suh, New York City Apartment/Corridor/Bristol, 2015

it?” (Quoted in Cochrane, 2014) The active verb tense in her description seems important as all of the objects created for this installation, though surely fixed securely, seemed to be shifting and collapsing around the viewers as they walked through the towering heaps. Barlow’s work uses cloth extensively, but not exclusively, and this work creates material clashes of rigid, overlapping forms held aloft by soft materials, never moving, always threatening. The use of fabric served as a rumination on ruination, a questioning of the limits of structure.

In the fabric chambers created by Do Ho Suh, the peril is no longer hanging above us, but we the viewers become the potential agents of instability (Figure 68). The artist has recreated versions of his homes using gauzy, transparent fabric, perfectly replicating minute details of these structures. Although the material is whisper-thin, it hangs plumb-straight, carving out clear volumes in space, and giving the viewer the simultaneous feeling that one could enter the room and walk up the staircase, while at the very same moment, crush the entire home up into one greedy fist. Viewers are not actually permitted to enter the structures, but the familiarity of the domestic spaces means that we project ourselves into these spaces and imagine the room rippling around us.

Like the pendulous swing of *Suspended Ball*, the implied movement in these works occur entirely in our mind, through our innate knowledge of the unstable and ever-shifting nature of cloth.

Conclusions

In contrast to the emergence of physical pavilions in the post-war period designed to create moments of pleasure, relaxation and income generation, textile-based interventions into the built environment reach back into a separate lineage of transgressive incursions, and mobile shelters, creating instances of Stoner’s minor architectures. They enable a dismantling of existing power structures either through physical breaches of the space, or through the activation of an imaginary incursion in the mind of a viewer. These projects alter the ways participants can experience the existing physical structures around them.

At the same time, as the materials and strategies are often perilously close to the actual constructions of migration, there is a potential danger of fetishizing the nomadic within practices. While the construction of a permanent physical space is an exercise in the successful navigation of bureaucratic structures, an outward demonstration of financial resources, and a reification of physical wealth, the smaller-scale examples in this chapter are achievable by any individual with access to rope.

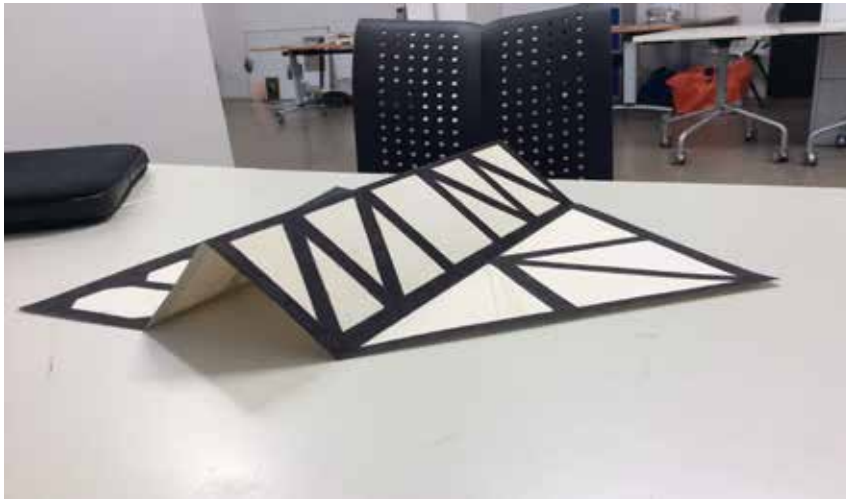
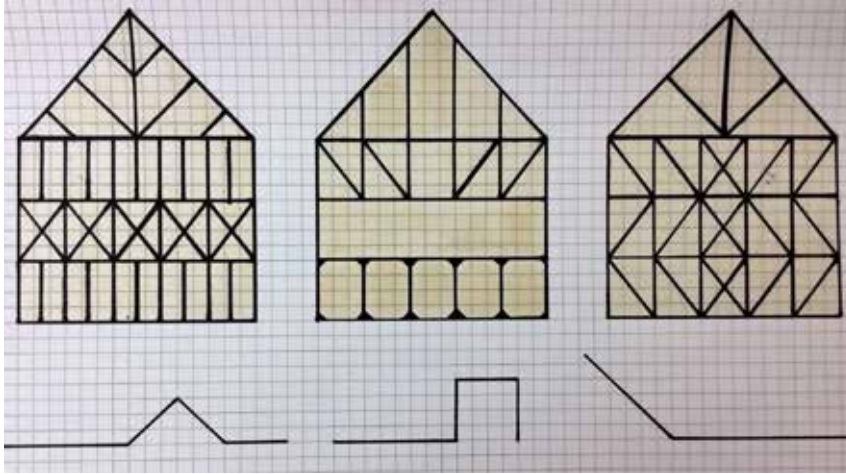
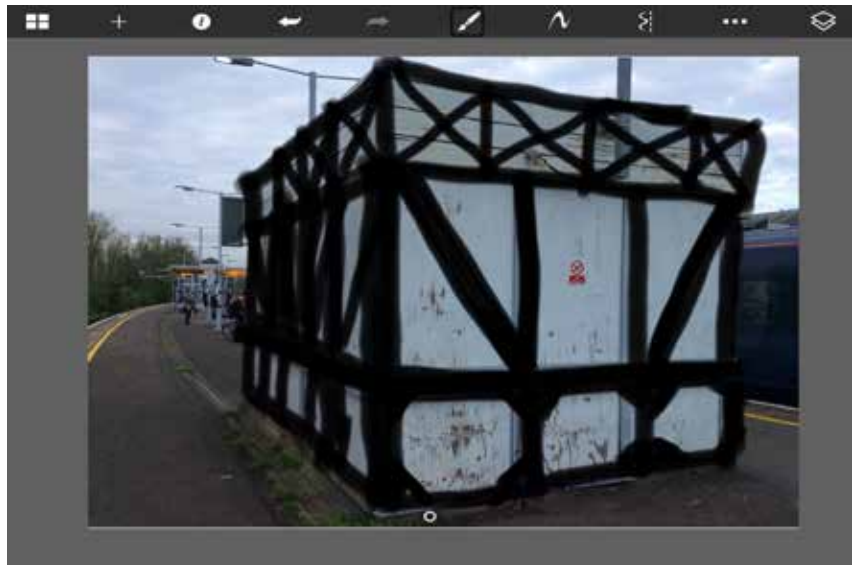


Figure 69 (above): Drawings for Mock Tudor Tent, 2013

Figure 70 (below): Model for Mock Tudor Tent, 2013

Mock Tudor Tent was developed at the beginning of the PhD process when I was facing a rather unexpected move from Newcastle to Kent. I was being told repeatedly that I was about to move to ‘real’ England, and all I knew was that it was conservative and Conservative and there was a great deal of tension around immigration. I’ve moved frequently in my life, often not by choice, and this new upheaval and my insecurities about my foreignness, and a fear if isolation manifested in a preoccupation with shelter and tents. Within this piece, a simplified façade of a house is rendered in cloth, turning it into a flexible plane that can be bent into the shape of a tent. I was interested in this veneer of historicism and respectability adapted into a modest, mobile form; the tent was both camouflage and satire.



Figures 71 and 72: Sketches for Mock Tudor Tent, 2014

The piece was constructed in the tiny house that we first moved to in Medway, and it far exceeded the dimensions of any of our rooms at nearly 5x5 meters. I replicated the methods of Abakanowicz working at her loom in her own small studio by also working with flexible cloth that could be rolled up as it grew larger and larger.



Figure 73: Installation with *Mock Tudor Tent*, 2014

We bought a house, momentarily rejecting our nomadic patterns, and exercising enormous economic privilege. The neighbouring park has had a person living in a tent for the past two years. Our local news reports are filled with the difficulties of Calais and Dover. And the worsening realities of the migration crisis made this work feel callow. The work was informed by the political climate; by ideas of a permanent national identity that feel increasingly rigid and entrenched, but I didn't feel that it was a useful response. Because of this, I had to leave it to one side.



Figure 74: Outdoor installation with Mock Tudor Tent, 2014

Nevertheless, it does transform a space by temporarily introducing the graphic, unmistakable lines of traditional vernacular architecture to an environment; momentarily occupying its surroundings with its oppressive historical weight before being whisked away once more.



Figure 75: Completed books, in their slipcase, offending 5mm length fixed, 2016

After some time

I've been taking a bookbinding class. It's not anything I haven't done before; great chunks of my teenage years were spent folding and sewing my words and drawings into little chap books that I would sell at small press fairs. My closest friends all did it, and my boyfriend. All our acquaintances were middle-aged poets, frustrated and leering.

Being a self-taught teenager working before internet tutorials, I made the books intuitively and badly and the joy of this class is having someone tell you exactly where your fingers might be best positioned in order to cleanly fold the sheets of paper for a signature. The precise angle you should hold a needle when you make the holes to bind the pages. We prepare meticulously for the smallest actions, standing around a raised table in one of London's art presses, fighting against our fatigue late into a winter's evening.

In these classes I demonstrate my speed and accuracy at sewing, my relative competency with cutting in smooth and precise lines, and my abysmal skills in measuring. My book is good, but 5 mm longer than everyone else's and that's not acceptable in this setting. We have to all make the same thing, or else the next steps won't work. All of our books have to match because we'll keep them all, these blank, pristine, objects in a neat, custom-made slipcase. I'll have to go in early next week to fix my mistake.

This sense of order and predictability is lost when I'm back in my own studio and I decide to try to weave something using red lametta I bought significantly discounted in the days after New Year's Eve.

It came folded and stapled to create a denser frill of red, shiny lengths. I undid the fastening and stretched it out, and carefully sewed it onto my tapestry frame. The spangles hang down, like a vertical loom, like Penelope, but unlike her, I can't weight them down with rocks, or clay, or even beads. They're too fragile and flimsy. I take coarse yellow carpet wool and start to sew it back and forth amongst the strands, ever trying to impose an order on the plastic and wool that just wants to tangle and break.

I have to have faith that when I get to the third or fourth passing of the yellow wool weft, it will start to shape up. There will be a rigidity.

After the fifth pass of the yellow wool, the weave starts to develop into a regular and manageable solid. A narrow band of cloth at the top of unruly lengths of shiny red strands.

I work twelve rows of thick, coarse yarn back and forth. First the bright yellow, then a hot pink, finally a burnt orange. The red lametta is so delicate and easily misaligned that my focus has to be absolute. I hunch over the frame and carefully pull it over and under the yarn. The days following are agonising; my back in spasms.



Figure 76: Partially completed woven work, after interventions by cats, 2016

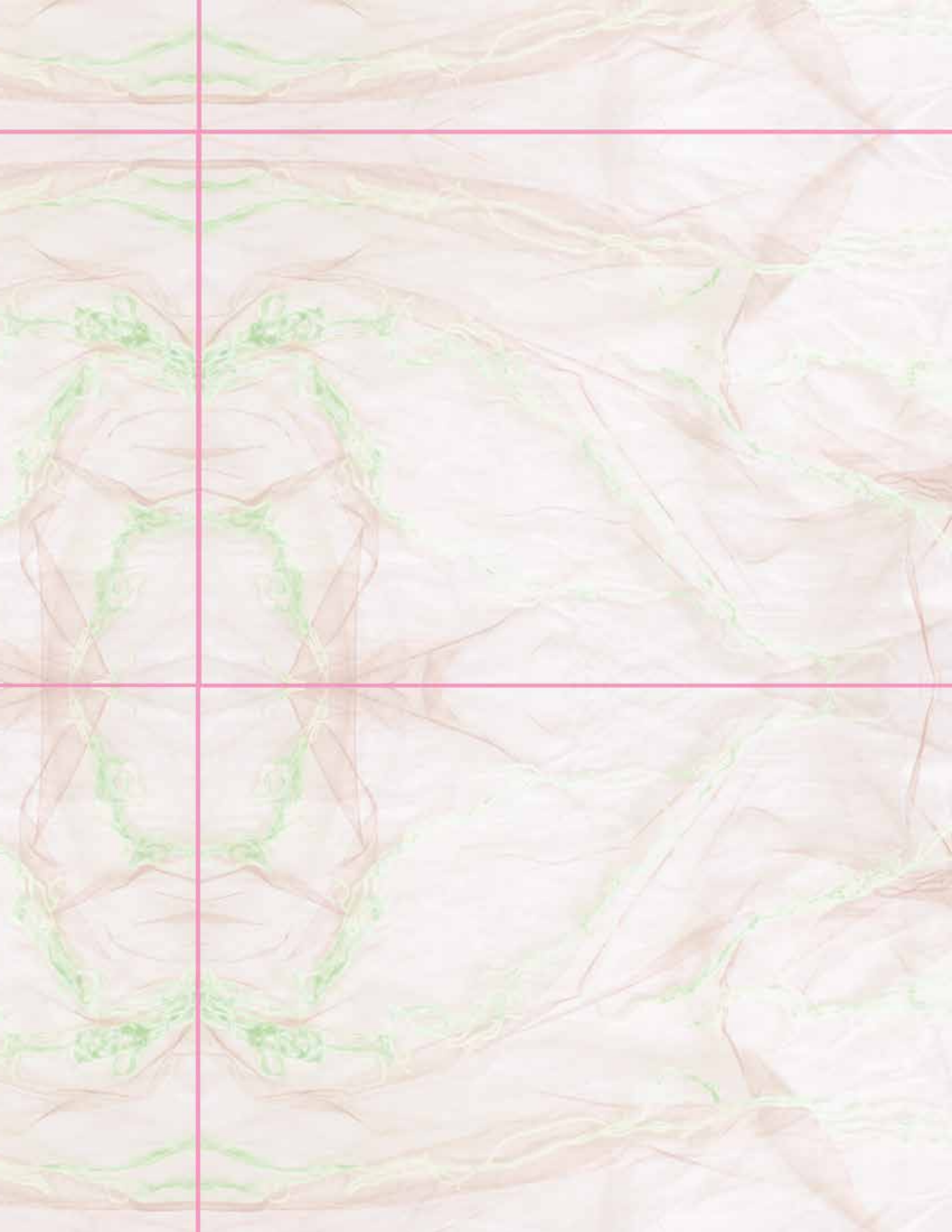
I think about Sheila Hicks saying that her contemporaries often gave up because they could neither deal with the politics of the material, nor the accompanying physicality of the practices. They were broken, both physically and intellectually. I feel this same sense of failure. I wonder if I would learn to work in the particular position required if I persisted. But I feel that it's ill-advised, and the project itself is a difficult one to commit to. It has no clear purpose, and I'm not sure I care enough about the lessons it teaches me. How to wrap lametta around unruly wool. This curtailed experiment, joins the rest of the false starts that live in the studio. Works I thought might tell me something, even if they never took on the weight of a finished piece in and of themselves.

One of the lasting comments from my Masters degree was from a visiting lecturer who, after a studio visit, told me I needed to find a way to make work faster. That spending all year working on small stitched panels was no way to build a career. I could see the truth of that sentiment even as I knew that this slow working would always be my fundamental speed. I couldn't speed up the process, but I could think about the objects in other temporal moments. This is where photography and video, and even writing, have emerged as vital tools in my studio practice. The switch in thinking from the lightening-fast snap to the geologically slow threads.

The red lametta stays attached to the tapestry frame and sits in my studio, a glistening jellyfish shimmering the corner. Something for the cats to bat during their daily patrols of this space. My new cat that I have now had for longer than the one that was killed, and his pal, next door's fluffy black and white beast with rosebud-pink paws.

The background features a complex pattern of overlapping, wavy lines in shades of light green and beige. A thin, light pink grid is superimposed on this pattern, consisting of one vertical and one horizontal line that intersect in the center of the image.

Time



An Instability of Time

Part 1 - The Rag Picker

Moving through the streets of late nineteenth century Paris, in the midst of Baron Haussman's radical ploughings that created the wide boulevards of the modern city, during the period when movement was becoming prescribed, the neighbourhoods rationalised and thinned out, the Rag Picker (or *Chiffonnier*), makes his way across the still-dark and disordered alleyways. His collections of rejected cloth thrown up by the urban environment a curated archive of the city; a ragged record of the actions and objects of the inhabitants amassed in his wicker basket. Threads manifesting the passage of time with their breakages and stains.

The rag picker crops up in the cultural lexicon of modernity first through Charles Baudelaire's poem 'Le vins des chiffonniers' printed in *Les fleurs du mal* in 1857 and then developed into an archetypal presence in Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* written between 1927-1940. Baudelaire conjures this character on his drunken nightly rambles; mythologising this lowly post as one imbued with the potential for creation and sovereignty. He's a cipher for the writer himself as he moves through the passages of the city, "[b]umping against the walls like a poet"(1993:p.217).

The character acts as a counterpoint for the wealthier flâneur; a man who creates the city through his chosen path in a dream-like state (Vidler, 2000:p76). Unlike the purposeful rag picker who scans the ground for fallen cloth, the flâneur looks straight ahead to consume and construct Paris through glass-plated windows, strolling along the new boulevards.

The eight verses of Baudelaire's poem leave us with barely enough to draw out this archetype, and the significance of the rag picker for both he and Benjamin can be understood through analogous processes of sifting and selecting in both writing poetry, and in Benjamin's Arcades Project. Benjamin cites this earlier description of Baudelaire's rag picker: "Everything that the big city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything it crushed underfoot, he catalogues and collects. [...] He sorts out and makes a wise choice; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, the refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry" (quoted in Benjamin, 1973:p.79). The rag picker's actions can perhaps also be understood as a reification of temporal modernity proposed by Baudelaire in 'The Painter of Modern Life': "By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is eternal and immutable [...] the passing moment and all of the suggestions of eternity that it contains." (1995:p.13)

The shreds collected by the rag picker embody this modern time; the garments suggest the passing

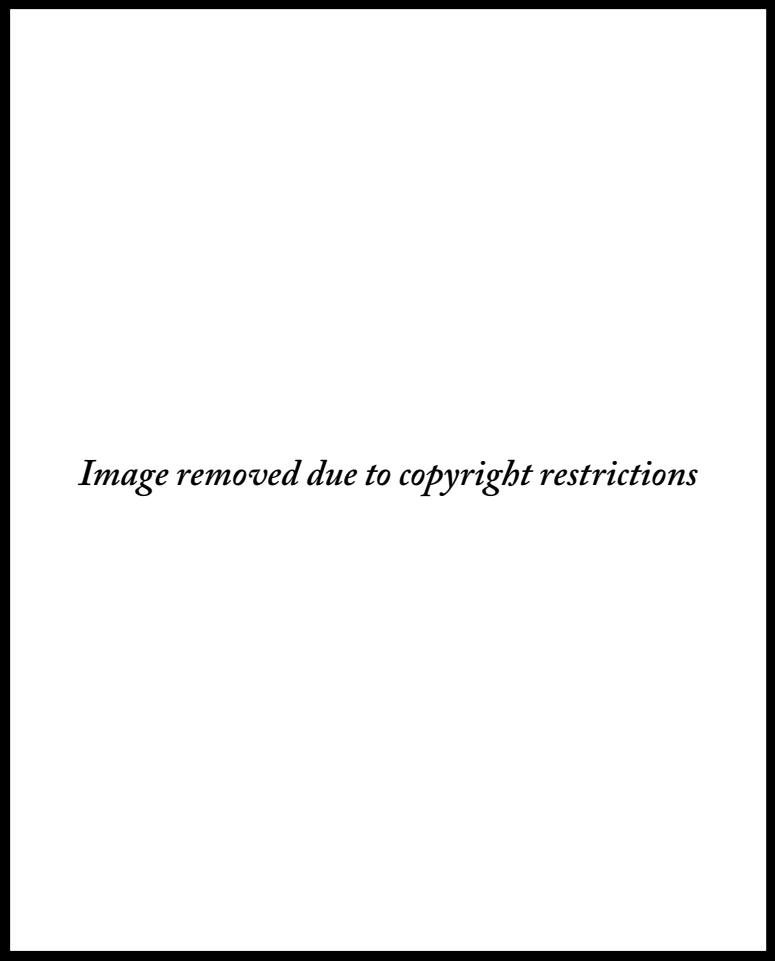


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Figure 77: Rag-Picker, c.1899-1901, Paris

of time through revealing traces of its previous purpose; a hint of the former whole, and through the ministrations of our bodies, of light, of cleaning and staining, the threads now snapped and fuzzed. Patches are worn through revealing the habits and motions that we repeatedly, unthinkingly perform. And the soft object is rendered more and more estranged from its original function. A fragmentary memory. The forgotten remnant. The rag betrays the passage of time on the material in unforeseen and unpredictable ways.

In late nineteenth century Paris, the rags contained a history of place that was being actively erased. Against a backdrop of scaffolding and rubble, the churning of stones, the smooth and wide new layers of macadam that was beginning to define the city; the rags, falling off the bodies of the inhabitants, leaking out of their homes, are the remnants of the city's history. The rag picker is the archivist, collecting the material, seeking out value, a first step in a regenerative creative process, and a knower of secrets.

The potential for the rag to be both mutable and immutable and to hold within its threads the ephemeral and the eternal is a quality that has informed sculptural practices of the last century. Artists have explored the multiple and shifting temporal modes embodied by the fragmentary garment, and the dropped piece of clothing.

Part 2 – The Clothing of Edgar Degas' Little Dancer

Prefiguring *3 Standard Stoppages* by over thirty years, and arriving a couple of decades after Baudelaire's poem, is Edgar Degas' *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen* (1878-1881) complete with her clothed exterior and her real hair tied with a ribbon. The work was shown at the 1881 Impressionist Salon and as the only sculpture exhibited by Degas in his lifetime, a material intentionality can be understood in the piece. Unlike the numerous bronzes produced by his heirs posthumously, this work was meant to be seen by the public. The original is now owned by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, USA, where an extensive programme of scanning and analysis was undertaken to reveal the complexity of production that both illuminates Degas' studio process and the function of the cloth in the work.

As the gallery details in its systemic catalogue, the underlying armature is made from pipes bulked out with wood, wrapped in cotton, wire and string, clad in clay and then, finally, layered and sculpted in wax (Lindsay, Barbour, Sturman 2010:p.116). Degas' use of paintbrushes for arms points to a provisional quality to the construction; an improvised assemblage of the remnants occupying the studio space; a methodology perhaps echoed by Duchamp when he first cut the lengths of string. However, the clothing including the ballet slippers, tutu, bodice, and ribbon in the strands of dark blonde hair, were all 'real' garments, tailored to fit the dancer and then, aside from the skirt and ribbon, covered with a thin layer of wax, incorporating them into the amalgam of the form.

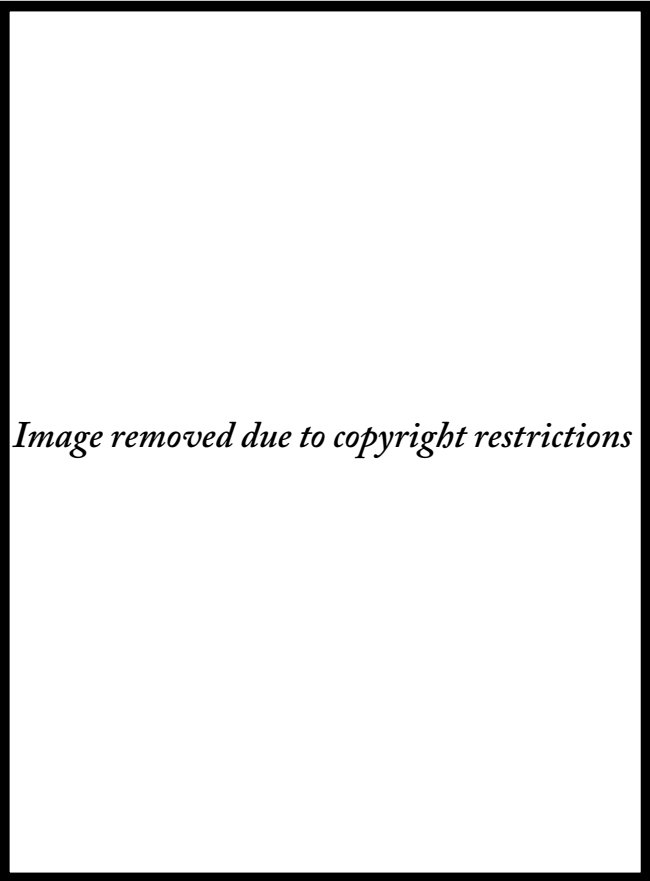


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*Figure 78: Edgar Degas, *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*, 1878-1881*

Despite the cloth, signs of a provisional studio method, and their shared city, *Little Dancer* does not directly lead to Duchamp, or to the lineage of cloth-based work that followed him. The clothing worn by the figure is supplementary to the structure of the figure and not contingent on textiles like *3 Standard Stoppages*. But these cloth garments do embody temporalities; temporalities that would not be conveyed were they sculpted or carved.

Interestingly, in this early case, the textiles on the wax figure signify a *stability* of time as they indicate that the work is complete; that this wax is not meant to be lost in the bronze foundry. Penelope Curtis notes that while the nineteenth century saw a rise of artists using soft modelling materials like wax, plasticine and clay, “[t]he variety of original materials is concealed, however, by the dominance of the two materials [marble or bronze] into which they were transposed” (1999:p.75). *Little Dancer* underwent no such translation; the original workings of the artist, were dressed and displayed for the public. The work is final.¹

The fabric also invokes instability through implied movement, and shifting temporality. By leaving the tutu unwaxed, an ever-possible animation of the figure is suggested. A small shift in her stance would cause the skirt to flutter and bounce. Motions integral to dance itself bringing to life the sculptural representation. In describing fashion-plates dating from the French Revolution, Baudelaire anticipates this potentiality of cloth depicted in etchings “Living flesh imparted a degree of movement to what seemed too stiff. It is possible today for the spectator’s imagination to give a stir and a rustle to this ‘tunique’ or that ‘schall’” (1995:p.2).

The patina of brown wax rubbed into the bodice, hair, and shoes reinforces the passage of time, serving as a reminder to the audience of the social realities of the figure. The young ballet dancers of the company were generally poor, of the same social class as rag pickers, and reliant on the financial support of older male patrons. Her clothing burnished in wax is not the pristine and immaculate costume of the principal dancer, but aged and worn, perhaps a cast-off. Garments that are moments away from the rag.

Finally, the use of cloth delineated the body underneath, and suggests a whole form, a full nudity, just beyond the vision and touch of the viewer.² Degas acts as Pygmalion dressing his creation, the figure dutifully presenting herself; even while her face betrays a tired resignation. The garment is one slip away from falling to the ground, her body given over to her patron, her garment collected by the rag picker, in his mobile wicker basket archive.

These modes of time; the implied motion, a diegetic time suggested by the subject of the work;

1 And, in fact, belaboured. Degas was originally meant to show it at the Impressionist Salon of 1880, but waited for a year before actually presenting it to the public. While the new scans indicate that this was because he re-sculpted the head and shoulders of the girl – a smaller skull and lower shoulders can be seen – it also suggests no rush to reveal the work until a level of personal satisfaction had been reached.

2 Interestingly and fairly unusually for the time, the work was presented under glass, perhaps to subvert any attempts at an unveiling.

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Figure 79 and 80: Erwin Wurm, One Minute Sculptures

the indexical smudging indicating both the trace of the artists' hand and symbolically tarnishing the new and formerly pristine garments; and the underlying erotic potential are further developed later on in the twentieth century when artists investigate the intersections of our bodies and cloth, particularly through performance, photography and film.

Part 3 – Cloth and the Temporal Body

Clothing does fall away from the body in the *One Minute Sculptures* of Erwin Wurm and Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*. These two works initiated through written instructions, both revealing a body through a simple gesture, but presenting divergent accounts of erotic time.

On one page of the *catalogue raisonné* of Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures 1989–1998*, a line drawing shows a man, arms akimbo, looking just beyond the viewer, dressed in a jumper and nothing else, his genitals softly hanging down below its hem, underneath the text reading “one minute in this position” (1999:p.69) (Figure 79). A few pages over, a line drawing of a woman, facing away from us and bent over, her trousers and undergarments pulled down to her knees, buttocks pushed out towards us, part offering, part jest, the suggesting “Do it for one minute” (1999:p.131) (Figure 80). On this page, right near the spine of the book borrowed from the British Library, I find crumbs and one pubic hair.³

Both drawings were created initially on paper, and then given as instructions to participants in a gallery setting. These small, everyday shifts of garments dictated by the artist create an uneasy space of control and desire. The simplicity of these movements replicates the mechanisms of a peep show: the curtain is drawn away, the erotic act is revealed, and then once the allotted time elapses, the curtain, the trousers come back up.

Through this timed constraint, these works investigate the ways in which a fetishised sexuality can coexist within the least sensuous cloth. This notion of time operates in two modes; the actual minute in the gallery, and the frozen, implied minute in the drawing. While many of these sculptures exist as photographs; where a single, indexical versions of the instruction has been enacted, these particular actions are not presented in this form. The drawing suggests a universality denied by the singularity of the photograph; the sketched figures could be any one of us; our own exposure one exposing gesture away. And this feeling of universality is reinforced by the banal clothing; these are not the spangles and feathers of a performer, but garments that any of us could be wearing at any given moment.

In her early work *Cut Piece* (1965) the then relatively unknown Yoko Ono sits in front of spectators in New York in a tidy black outfit and presents them with scissors which they can use to make an incision in her garments (Figure 81). The work, preserved as an 8-minute video is profoundly

3 Reviewing this book for the final submission of this dissertation, roughly two years' later, I find the same hair and the same crumb stuck between pages 130 and 131.

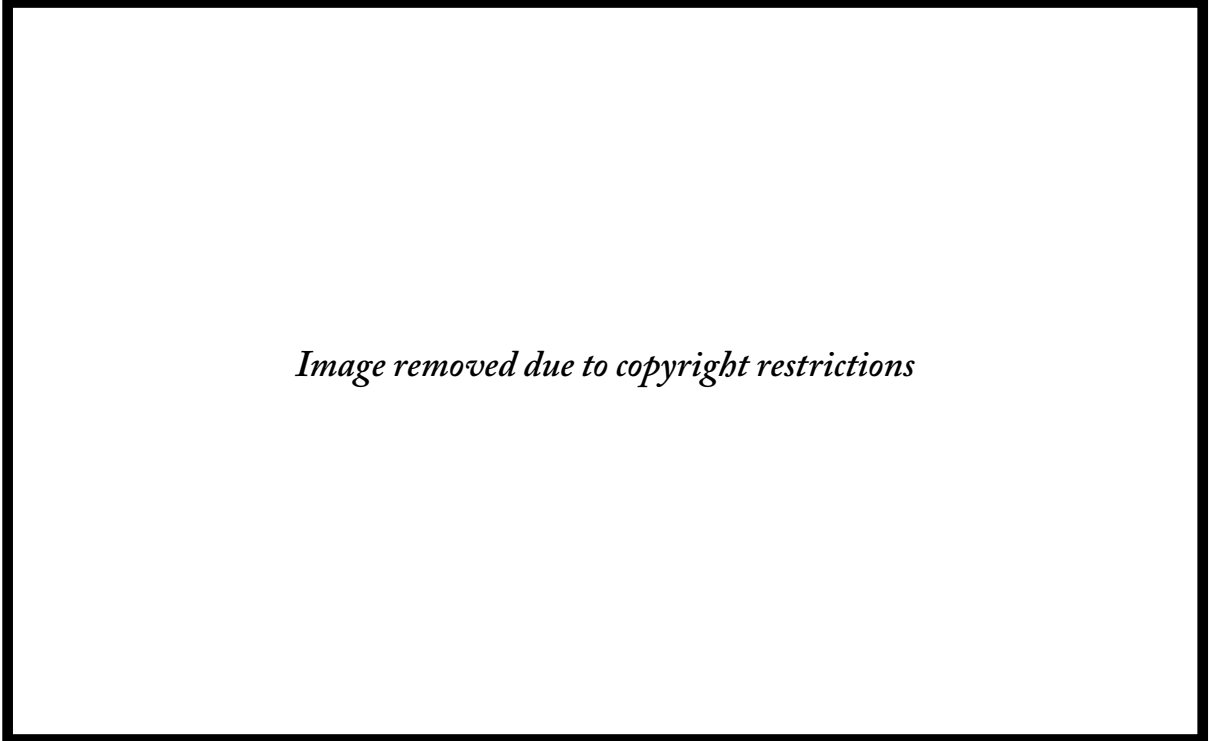


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Figure 81: Yoko Ono, Cut Piece, 1965

unpredictable and unsettling as the audience take turns to approach this young woman and cut into her dress; turning her clothing into rags, speeding up a process that might normally take years, and even then might never be so complete a destruction. Throughout the act, the clothing shifts and droops in new ways as the haphazard snips inflicted by the audience wear away at its structural integrity.

The piece feels painfully slow as we queasily watch more and more cuts appear, and her body reveal itself, one incision at a time. A body, we're reminded by Harding, that had the double frisson of being both female, and Asian (2010:p.95). But the speed at which the garment transforms into a rag is lightening fast. That Ono has agency in this work is undeniable, she has willingly constructed this space and the context for these actions. But the audience is audibly troubled by the final participant, who clearly thrilled at that the few remaining shreds of cloth covering her torso mean that he can slice it away to nudity, starts to systematically cut away at bra straps and the remaining dress until Ono has to hold the cloth up to prevent the audience from seeing her breasts.

The action of her clasping the remnants to her chest, not allowing them to fall to the ground suggest that Yoko wished to create a rag and not an elaborate and participatory strip tease. It was meant to illuminate an exchange and uncover a vulnerability, not a preamble to titillation. The position of her body reinforced this; sitting on the ground, the clothing pools around her; it's not a pose engineered to display or completely reveal.

In the notes accompanying this piece, Ono clarifies that it may be performed by a woman or a man and that the performer should wear their best clothing for the purpose (Munroe, Hendricks, 2000:p.188). This raises the stakes and makes the sacrifice that much more acute. Participants are invited to take away the cloth that has transformed from a valued garment to a symbolic fragment in a matter of minutes.

These two works disrupt the eroticism of revealed flesh as formulated by Barthes when he says, "[i]s not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes? In perversion [...] it is intermittence [...] which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is the flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance as disappearance." (1975:p.10) The eroticism of the text is not found in the 'pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense' where the formulation of the structure is understood in advance, but rather in the tears, and edges, but instead in "the abrasions I impose upon the fine surface: I read on, I skip, I look up, I dip in again." (1975:p.12)

Cut Piece interrupts the temporality of the implicitly understood strip tease by subverting the way the clothing operates, she is cut out of the garments through a series of improvised incursions; the normal snaps, clasps and zips are rendered functionless. And the understood narrative of the

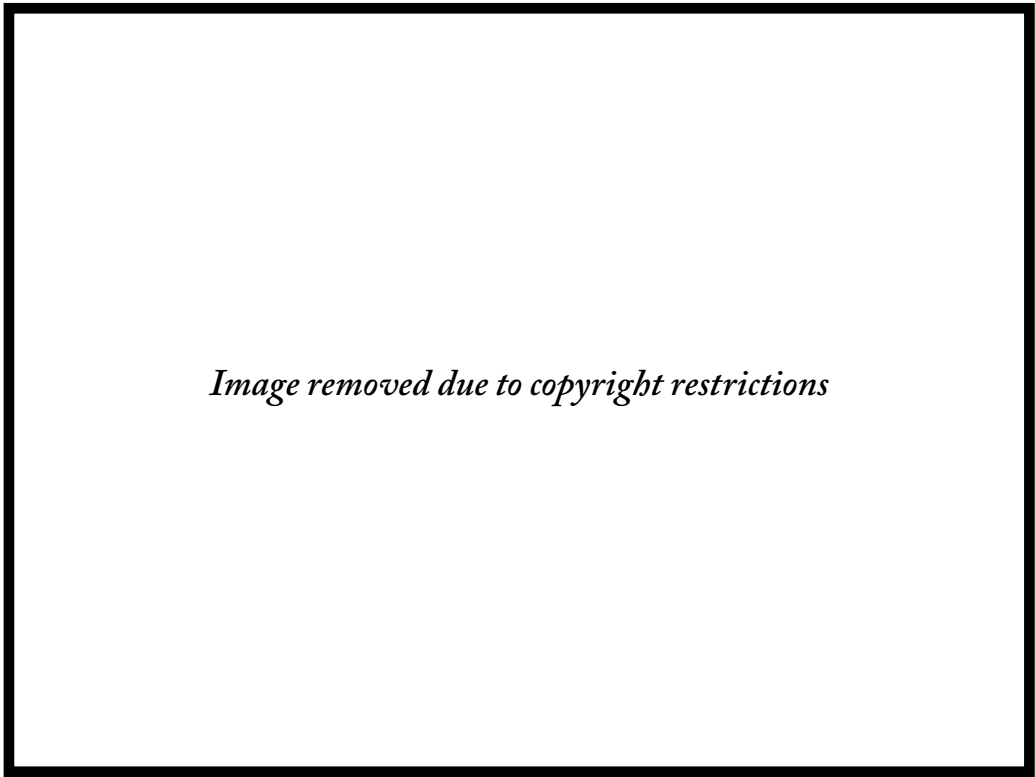


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*Figure 82: Man Ray, *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse*, 1924, original photograph*

body revealing itself changes. Instead of a steady heightening of erotic possibility, the participants are forced to interrogate their own part in the act and balance what they wish to see with perhaps an empathic connection to Ono and perhaps an anticipated feeling of judgement from the rest of the audience. Ono transforms the clothing into cloth, and their unstable nature is revealed to the audience.

In Wurm's sculptures, time is also subverted by denying the viewer the build-up. Instead, a normal garment is instantly made erotic and just as quickly returns to its banal state. Ono inculcates us into the *Cut Piece*, and we identify with the audience more than the performer, for how many amongst us would position ourselves on that stage of the concert hall? But somehow our participation in the *One Minute Sculptures* feels more plausible, we could each be those drawings, and instead of an erotic charge, we feel the embarrassment of the depicted figures, the infinitely slow elapsing of the minute.

These works function differently from Bas Jan Ader's *All My Clothes* (1970), a black and white photograph ostensibly showing all of the garments of the artist splayed out across the roof of his Californian house. The clothing is haphazard, a coherent aesthetic decision within his practice of falling and crashing. There is a sense that a life could be intuited by the collection of the object; there is a grand gesture in the act, for if these are indeed all of the artist's clothes, then his own naked body must be somewhere outside of the frame.

Part 4 – Lens-Based Media and Shifting and Frozen Fibres

As works shift between media, the potentiality of cloth to suggest varying modes of temporality can also change. Even two photographs can convey this proposed instability to varying degrees. Consider Man Ray's *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse* once more. Although generally reproduced in contemporary photography to show the full sculpture, its first iteration was as a photograph taken by the artist and printed in the periodical *La Revolution Surréaliste* in 1924 and exhibited as a sculpture only in 1936 for the *Exposition surréaliste d'objets*. The image in wide circulation is a 1972 replica of the lost original made under the guidance of the artist and in reaction to a series of unsatisfactory and unauthorised versions produced the year before. (Mundy 2003)

In the original photograph, the sculpture is cropped, obscuring the wrapped edges and resisting an easy decoding of the object as a cloth-covered sewing machine bound by string (Figure 82). Amplified by stark, directional lighting, the object initially appears as a covert landscape until we see the details of the weave of the fabric and the texture of the string and reduce the mass to something smaller; perhaps a piece of furniture, perhaps a body. The original work alludes to Ducasse's phrase (writing under his pseudonym Comte de Lautréamont): 'Beautiful as the accidental encounter, on a dissecting table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella' (1972:p.177), celebrated by the Surrealists

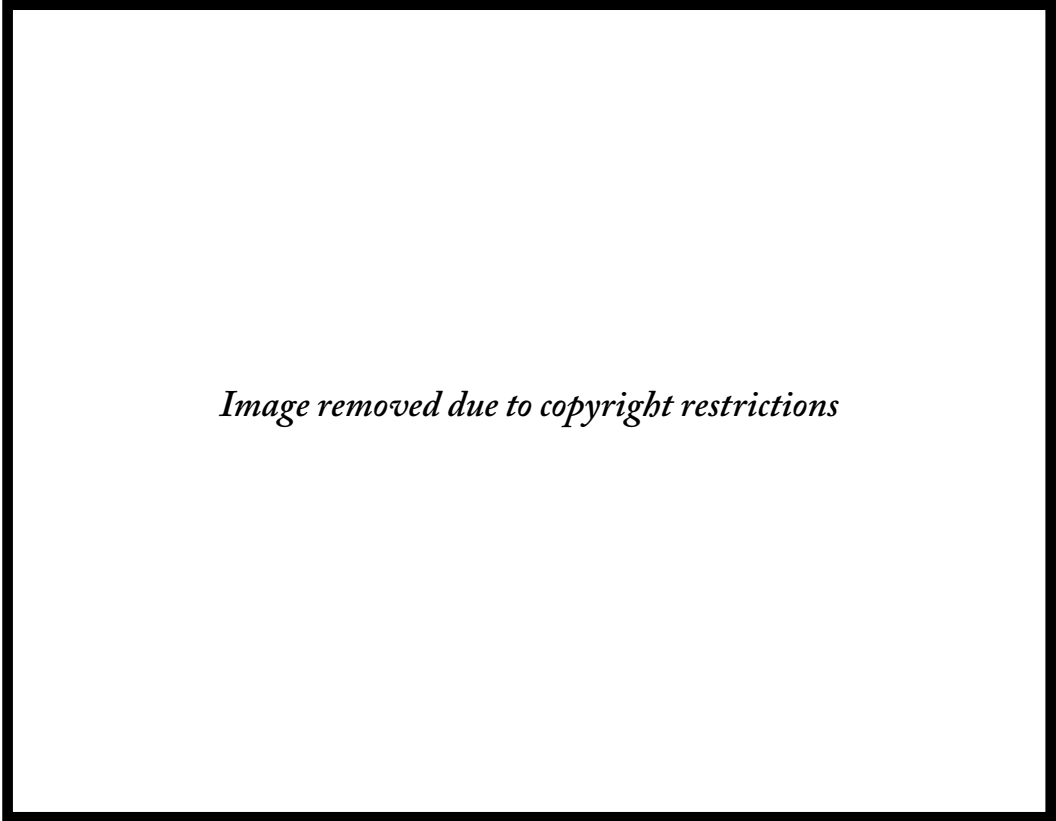


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*Figure 83: Nigel Rolfe, *The Rope that Binds Us Makes Them Free*, 1984, original photograph by Hans Namuth*

for its unexpected juxtaposition and sexually charged image replete with cuts, punctures, openings and closings; an encounter shifting from something fixed and sewn down, to one that opens up yet again through the expansion of the umbrella and the shadowy suggestion of the scalpel blade.

The contemporary reproduction loses this obscure and ambivalent array of possibilities by presenting the object in full, in clear flat lighting and signals a shift in register from an artwork itself to a catalogue entry for a museum. We clearly see the edges of the work, and the bound string, tied in a far less complex manner than the original version, loses some of its mystery. There is no longer the suggestion of a body beneath the cloth. Somehow the sculpture becomes a literal illustration of a visual pun and the object is back on a sterile, museological, dissecting table.

Benjamin perhaps never anticipated how unfixed works of art would become and how that might alter their nature in the ever-advancing age of mechanical reproduction. First photography and then video developed new potencies in the 1960s and 70s as works of art 'dematerialised' and took on active and ephemeral dimensions. The camera became a tool for capturing these actions and gestures, but given its understood power to produce definitive versions of works, a certain instability in the works was subverted.

This is demonstrated in the two attitudes presented by Abakanowicz and Morris as their *Abakans* and *Felt Pieces* were documented. In 1969, Abakanowicz made a film entitled *Abakans* with Jarosław Brzozowski, filming her structures in slow motion on a beach. She says of the work:

(I) felt my metal sculpture was too rigid and when I finished...nothing could be changed. But woven material can move. It can react to people, and they react, when they touch it. It can move too in the wind when put outside. It had a life which no other material has. (Inglot 2004:p.61)

The described video actively demonstrates the potentiality of the cloth; a movement that could be imagined by viewers in the gallery setting, but is fully unleashed by taking the objects to the unpredictable setting of the windy seashore.

Conversely, the fixed nature of photography began to suppress this same potentiality in the Morris' *Felt Pieces* as he explains:

The early works had multiple positions – sometimes thrown on the floor and hung on the wall. But once the works were photographed nobody wanted to hear about alternative positions. As of course works on the wall are easier to deal with than the things on the floor so the wall option became the preferred position. I supposed this illustrates Duchamp's remark about how art quickly loses its aesthetic smell and becomes frozen and arid. Anyway some of the works involving many separate pieces could of course never be installed twice in the same way. These maintained their indeterminate status

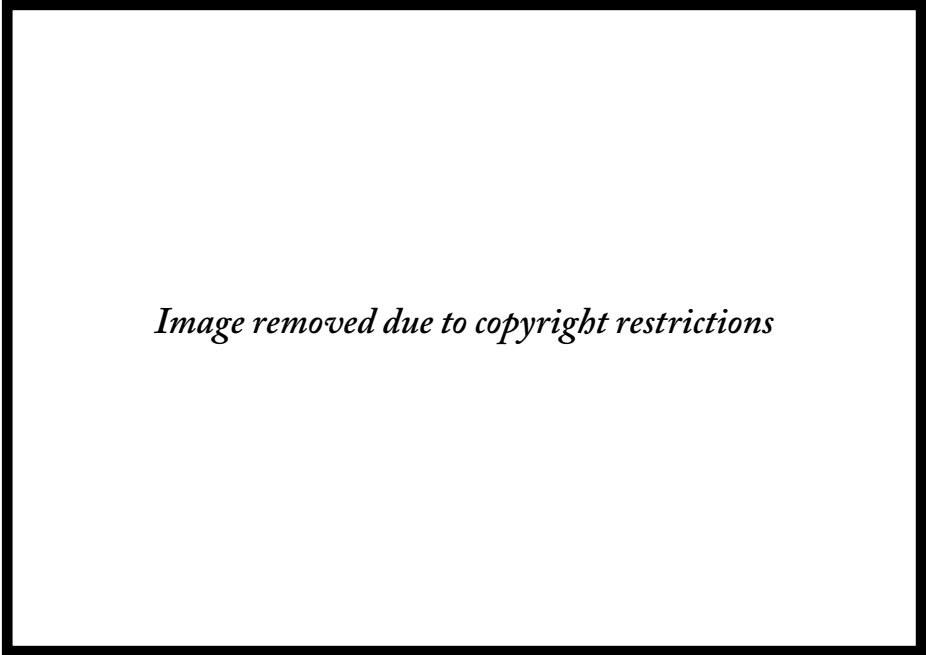


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*Figure 84: Nigel Rolfe, *The Rope that Binds Us Makes Them Free*, 1986, video*

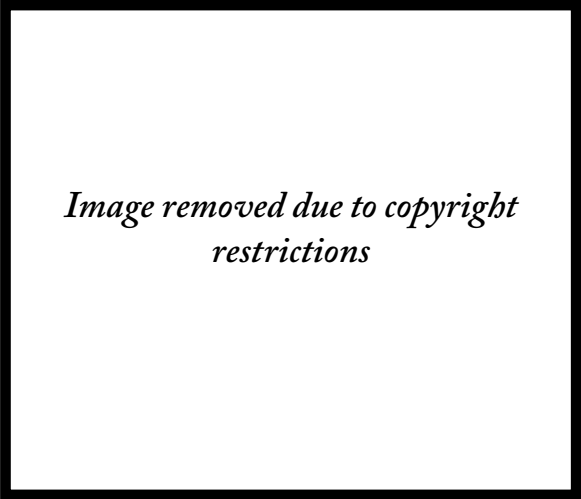
As the felt works progress, there is a move away from the chaotic heaps and piles towards larger pieces with clear, linear incisions that could be predictably hung from fixed points and replicated to photographic perfection around the globe. Although the quote would suggest that Morris did not intend the work to eventually function in this manner, felt is an ideal material for these fixed configurations. As it is composed of a density of fibres pressed together into a mass, and not woven, it has neither the stretch of other kinds of cloth, nor the danger of fraying. Even in its collapse, it is the most inert and stable of fabrics.

The fixity of a photograph and openness of moving images are not definitive categories; Nigel Rolfe was initially resistant to the filming of his performance *The Rope that Binds Us Makes Them Free*. In this work, first performed in 1983, Rolfe takes a large, round ball of creosote-soaked sisal rope found in a derelict cottage in Ireland and slowly wraps the mass around his own head. For many years, it was documented through only a select few photographs taken as part of an ongoing working relationship with Hans Namuth (Sigler, 2012).

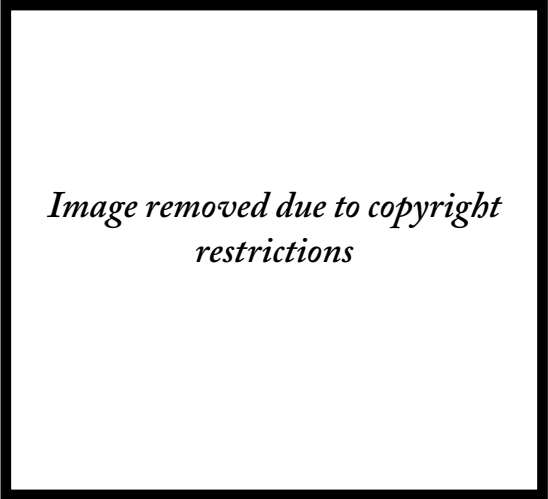
The work is contingent on the action of unwrapping and re-wrapping but in the photographs, all taken in the middle of the performance, the action has been frozen (Figure 83). The equivalency in size between the ball of rope and the wrapped head creates a fleeting sense of stasis. But this is quickly subverted by the blur of the ball; it is out of focus and clearly still in action, continuing to be unwound in order to subsume the figure. The timescale of the performance is obscured within these images; the viewer has no sense of how long the head has been consumed by rope, of whether it can or will continue, or whether the head will ever re-emerge. The viewer is presented with a monstrous figure and the ropey source of its creation, but no feeling of resolution.

In the video version, the narrative of the piece is presented clearly, and the demonstrable physicality involved in contending with an unwieldy ball is amplified, engendering a sense of doubt and palpable fear (Figure 84). Is the completion of this simple action even possible? The audience watches as the rope binds the head in thicker and thicker rounds, losing all definition of the face and the skull, becoming monstrous and over-sized. Rolfe speaks of the implicit danger; the blocking of the airways, the nearness of choking and says that the audience breathes for him (2011). Rolfe initially wished to keep the sensorial and visceral potencies of the performance restricted to a live setting. Within the video, the ending and the duration remains the same, the stakes are lowered, the narrative arc is undisturbed.

There are instances where artists have reinforced the potentiality of cloth in photography by translating the forms into an inert sculptural form. Bruce Nauman's series, *Eleven Colour Photographs* (1966-67), includes the photograph *Bound to Fail* showing the closely cropped back of a man in a jumper, his arms bound by large ropes (Figure 85). The photograph in its original context operates



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Figure 85 (left): Bruce Nauman, *Bound to Fail*, 1966, photograph
Figure 86 (right): Bruce Nauman, *Bound to Fail*, 1970, bronze cast

as a quick, saturated visual pun, amongst the images of the spurting artist water fountain and the 'hot' being waxed. The works are gestural, experimental, and in series; one imagines the figures moving through the studio from one mise en scene to the next. The ropes tied and quickly loosening again, and releasing the captive.

Nauman went on to develop the work by recreating the back, jumper and ropes and casting it in concrete, depicting the same close crop of the figure. Titling this edition of seven bas-reliefs *Henry Moore: Bound to Fail* the work is transmogrified into a caution to his contemporaneous British peers not to fall into the fashionable habit of denigrating and dismissing Moore's legacy. Nauman reportedly feeling that "they shouldn't be so hard on him, because they're going to need him" (quoted in Slifkin 2011:p.86). Transforming the work from a soft and shifting depiction of cloth into a concrete frieze solidifies the shifting time of the photograph, creating a work that feels materially authoritative, as canonically-appropriate as Moore's own legacy, and denies the figure the possibility of escape (Figure 86). The bound time becomes infinite.

A recent series titled *Derivable Sculptures* artist Ziad Antar also enacts this shift from the mobile potentiality of cloth captured in photography to the immutable cast form. In 2012, the artist documented the public sculptures of Jeddah which include many significant modernist works by artists such as Calder, Miro, and indeed, Moore. By some estimations, this is the most significant collection of public works globally (Jones 2015). After a period of neglect, the works are undergoing conservation efforts and are currently bundled under protective sheets, hinting at the forms beneath but withholding their specificity from viewers.

In the initial photographs, the artistic significance of the underlying works can only be assumed by the viewer (Figure 87). The black and white images present abstracted and ghostly figures, and the scale and context are unclear. The viewer can only intuit the formalism of the underlying shapes through the arrangements of the cloth and binding rope.

In 2015, the artist began a process of recreating these forms in cast concrete. This act involved an imagining of the shapes in the round; the photographs depict one fixed vantage point, and a significant amount of time had elapsed meaning that his own memory of the forms was hazy and unclear (Selma Feriani Gallery, 2015). The improvised forms, mounted onto plinths and shown on the banks of the Thames, lack the crisp precision of the photographs, and the details of the edges of the cloth, the binding rope holding and defining the forms (Figure 88).

Unlike the *Little Dancer*, these sculptures revert to the solid sculptural fold, denying the viewer the possibility of unveiling the work and seeing the masterpiece beneath. The cloth presents only a frustrated illusion of motion and potential.

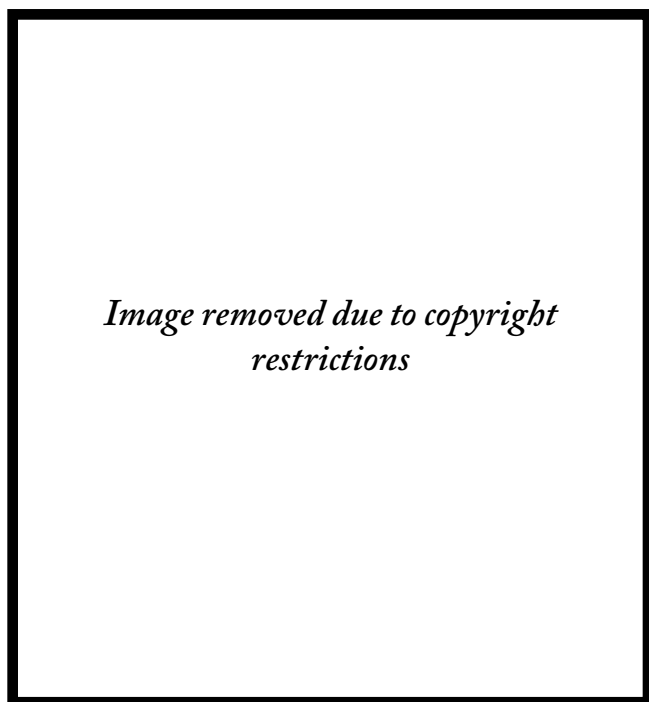


Figure 87 (left): Ziad Antar, Axiom 2, 2012, photograph



Figure 88 (right): Ziad Antar, Derivable 2, 2014, cast concrete

Conclusions

The shreds of cloth contained in the basket of the Rag Picker embody a time that is simultaneously immediate; the ruined fragments collected by his hands, and historical; the stained and ruptured garments of his fellow citizens. When Benjamin thinks through the Rag Picker, it is often to exemplify one end of the Parisian social strata and a mastery of the city: “Paris, when seen in a ragpicker’s hamper is nothing much...To think that I have all Paris here in this wicker basket...!” (Pyat quoted by Benjamin 381). These multiple registers of information give the Rag Picker an archive of the city and a mastery of the territory.

When Degas introduced his *Little Dancer*, complete with her garments, the temporality of sculpture became unfixed as the near-movement of her skirt, and the separation of her garments from her body animated the figure in revelatory ways. In Ono and Wurm’s performative works, the imagined action becomes a realised provocation as the garments are cut and pulled away. The temporal duality of cloth as the immutably-in-place and the fallen is reinforced in the *One Minute Sculptures* by the implication that our own momentary unveiling is an ever-present possibility, while in *Cut Piece* the fixed becomes fragmentary.

The ability of cloth to be both of this moment, and of the past, eternal, moment can be amplified through the combination of lens based media and the introduction of fixed and unfixed time. Fixed time embedded in the cloth itself, and the unfixed nature of the movement captured on film or in pixels; a model of Baudelaire’s modernity and “the passing moment and all of the suggestions of eternity that it contains” (1995:p.13).

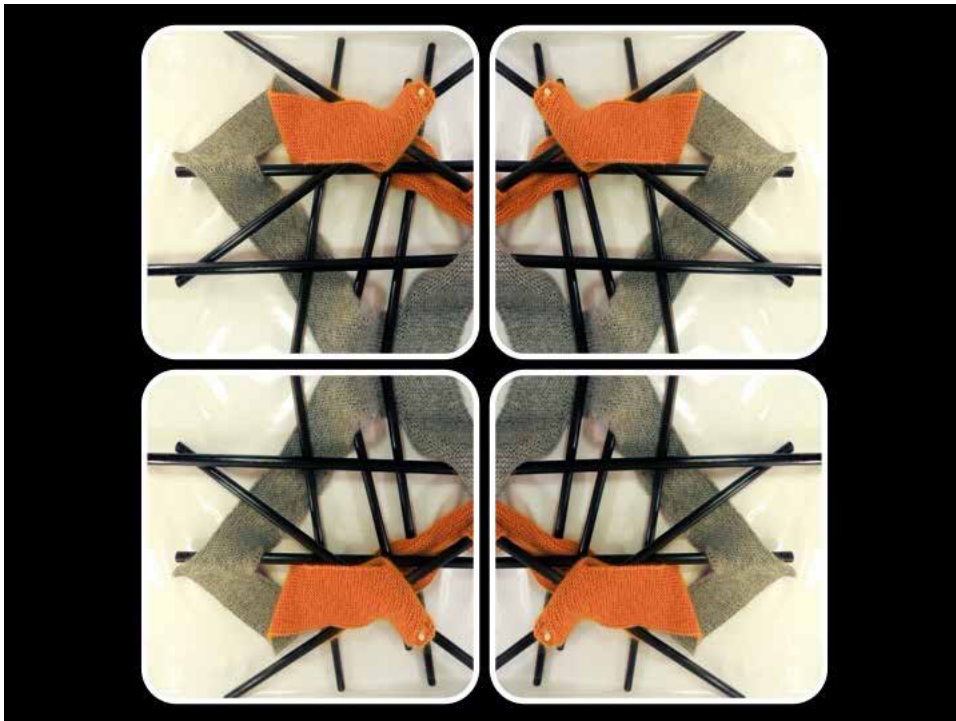


Figure 89: Questions to ask yourself before building your first house, video still, 2014

The photograph and video works developed over the past three years resulted from an attempt to salvage an unmitigated disaster. While making work for Edinburgh Sculpture Workshops, every idea I tried just failed. Texts would not be written; pieces I had made turned out strangely when photographed. In a desperate move, I constructed a photo shoot with the failed bit and pieces, and while the images were unremarkable in and of themselves, once they were mirrored, the chaos formed into constructions. Structures reminiscent of buildings, ordered and robust. The images started to feel aligned to the text that I had been writing.



Figure 90: The Delays II, 2014

Following this project, I've continued to experiment with this phenomenon. The first projects involved more elaborate photographic sets where depth was emphasised, giving the images a more cavernous and architectural feel, particularly in the series *The Delays*. Within these works, mobile and precarious arrangements, contingent on cloth, are frozen into seemingly stable arrangements.



Figure 91: Gunpowder Works, photographs, shown as part of If I could sink my teeth into the whole world, 2015

The shifting nature of fabric was used to different effect in a series of images interrogating the legacy of the Oare Gunpowder Works in 2015. This location was one of Britain's primary sites for gunpowder production from the 17th century until the 1930s. Now a wildlife park, the displaced violence and hidden colonial resonances are hidden amongst the ruins. Images of the site were transferred to fabric and then re-photographed, wrinkled and obscured, suggesting a fragmentary and partial understanding.



Figure 92: Repeated Habits, video still, 2016

Finally, these experiments culminated in a series of brief videos. The images in the frame are mirrored and then the clips are looped and reversed again to create another mirroring effect. Like the initial photographs, they fluctuate between a still and stable constructions, and scenes of chaotic, unpredictable movement. The works act as small vignettes to a studio process where the same elements are positioned and repositioned always resisting a final, definitive formation.

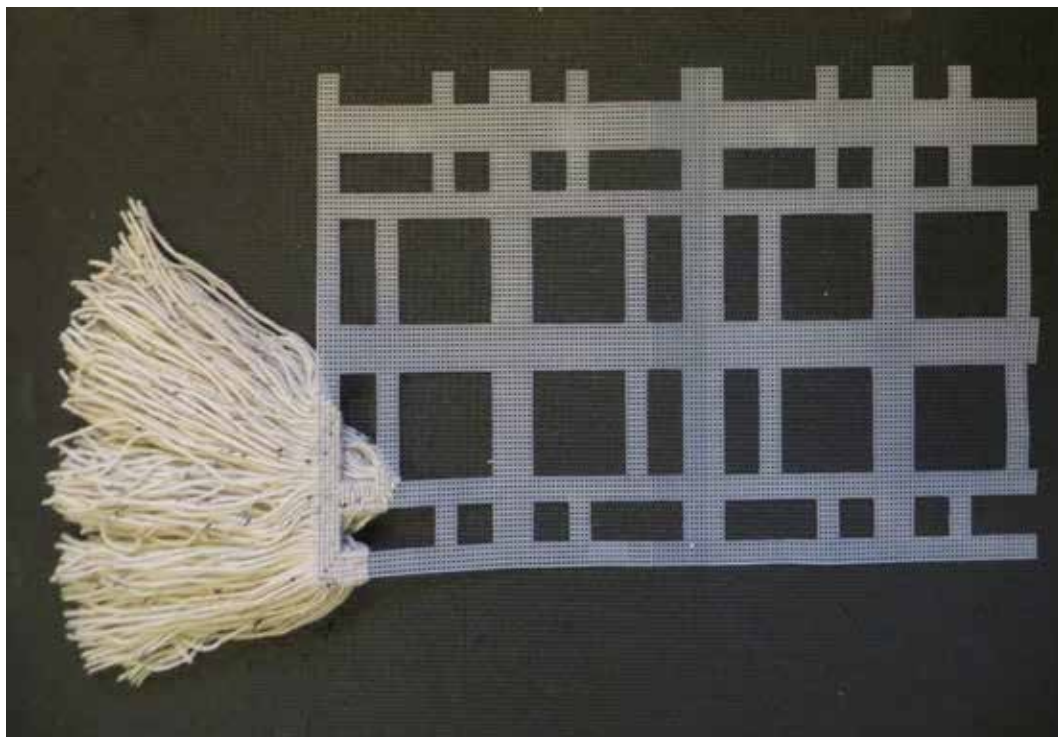


Figure 93: Breeze Block 1I, in progress

Nearing the End

I revisit this text for the first time in a long time and realise that I never recorded the completion of the black piece or the start of the white one. The production has become an automatic and unthinking part of my day, these plush hours of steady production, and I forget that milestones and final outcomes are embedded in the multiplying strands.

The white piece, not white at all, but a warm oatmeal flecked with black, a sister to the original, the wool purchased from the same line, is now near completion and I feel a sense of grief as the squares are filled up bit by bit with wool. I no longer actively consider the process or the outcome; it's become too familiar and all of the decisions have been made. I'm enacting motions that I dictated months before. There's no anxiety about how much wool it will take. I just bought the same amount as before and because the pattern of the white one has more gaps, I'll have a great deal left over, maybe an entire ball. With the black work I often modified the lengths, switching between a standard short, medium and long to try and achieve undulations, but I decide that they are distracting rather than interesting, and for the white piece I restrict it to two lengths; the centre of the work is made up of the short pieces and the exterior is formed from the longer strands.

These are not the first pieces I've made with this method; I wanted to expand the scale and also find out how the objects might operate if there were holes cut into the plastic canvas beforehand. I opted for the geometric regularities of breeze blocks, these brutal decorative insertions, a utopic mid-century confection that might now read as bleakly corrosive in a British housing estate, or still-aspirational in a modernist Californian mansion, painted bright white, walling off a dense garden of cacti and succulents. The patterns are faintly familiar as they resolve themselves out of the mass of yarn, but perhaps it is difficult to recall why.

The initial pieces of plastic canvas were the same size, as are the blocks that make up the pattern. But they don't fit neatly onto the canvas; there are fragmentary edges where the yarn seems to take over.

Towards the end of the process I've refined my improvised and rudimentary tool of a piece of folded wire. Eventually the stranded metal succumbs to fatigue and frays, and I have to cut off a new piece from the coil that sits on my desk. I've learned that a longer piece is easier to manipulate, and if I wrap the ends in tape, the wire won't catch on the yarn. I try to think about ways of making the tool even better. Trying to pinch the wire in a pin vice, giving it a real handle. I would be embarrassed for anyone to see the tool. But I'm too drawn to the simplicity of this solution formed entirely from materials hanging around the studio. Like Duchamp's string, or Fontaine's getaway gear. It lacks elegance, but it never hampers the activity. It does just what I want it to.

Someone who has been through a similar PhD asks me whether I had stopped making work yet. They



Figure 94: tools, frayed and cast aside

said it like it was a normal part of practice-led research. Not terminal, but a necessary pause to actually write and consider the work that has been made. I could understand the logic even as the panic started to rise from my stomach right into my mouth. I didn't start this research in order to halt my practice. Once the white piece is done, something else will have to fill that space. Even if it's covert and secret and still restricted to after 3 PM. Something I never reveal in this document or to an examination panel.

A good outcome for this research would be for my shame to dissipate, the material shame that I carry around, a by-product for insisting on using cloth and having to explain and justify it all the time. I'm not suggesting this is the most traumatic kind of shame a person can carry. I'm not trying to be dramatic. But it has followed me; as persistent a companion as cloth itself. Even through the PhD process. Even when I came here to explicitly, loudly, do this cloth work. To think about fabric. To talk about it exhaustively. Still we had to argue about why I choose this material. And I think the implication continues to be that textiles, this most loaded of terms, this term I will continue to say because they hate it so much, cannot hold meaning beyond itself, its surface, its decorative potential. It cannot convey anything beyond the most limited suburban domestic realities of women that we're tired of thinking about.

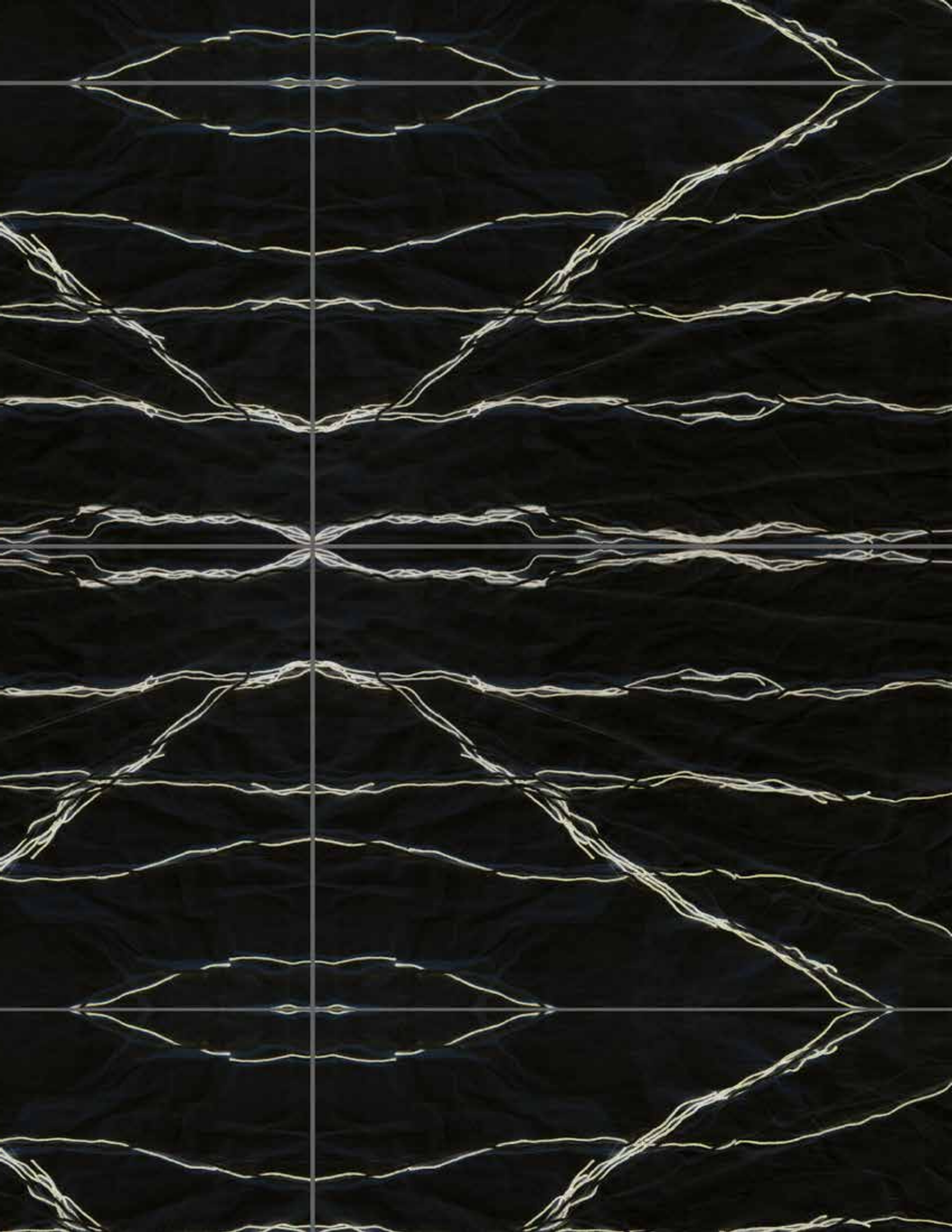
I don't think this is a great trauma. But neither do I think it's a particularly productive state. I've grown defensive and reticent to show my work, to have these conversations. To steel myself in the face of their gaslighting. And so if I can do this research, pull out these stories, make the work I want to make, bring it all together, then maybe I can dissolve the shame. Be a midnight Penelope unravelling all of those feelings and just never feeling the need to weave it back up, back in to my practice. Take Man Ray's Gift to my sharp embarrassment and leave the tattered shreds outside the door of my studio.

I think again about Sheila Hicks sitting on the stage at Whitechapel Gallery, aged almost 90 and talking about how her early fibre peers fell away through their own physical and emotional exhaustion of having to deal with cloth. And of course when she says that it feels like an invitation to consider her own physicality and her own resilience, and sitting at the back of the room, I can't detect any frailty. But I also detect no shame. And I think this is her secret. She feels no shame about the materials she's used to build her life. My external advisor suggests that it may have also helped that she moved to Paris and could duck the politics of New York and rigid, policed boundaries of art practices, and not quite participate in the Tapestry circuits of Europe. This feels plausible. She avoided the 'ends everything'.

While I work in the afternoons I listen to podcasts, picking ones that talk about creating; music, film, food. A sometimes oblique link to my own activity. When people discuss their process you hear very familiar things. The importance of routinely sitting down to work despite not knowing whether anything fruitful will arise; the inevitability of the shit version that comes before the one that works. Musicians describing a desire to get beyond or outside of language; a space I yearn for as well. There are all kinds of barriers to making work and staying with a project. All kinds of forces that shape creation. But shame is a useless one; paralysing and inert and I make a promise to myself to be brave and release myself from it. To work from a place outside of language and forget the very contours of that word.

The background is a dark, textured surface with a grid of thin, light gray lines. Overlaid on this grid are numerous bright yellow, glowing lines that form a complex, web-like pattern. These lines are thicker and more irregular than the grid lines, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is a high-contrast, futuristic, or scientific aesthetic.

Conclusion



Conclusion

Part 1 – A shift in material thinking

As the years have worn on, it's begun to feel less regressive to devote a sustained period of investigation to a specific material.

I write this first iteration of a chapter, in a document I confidently title "Conclusion", just after the announcement that Phyllida Barlow will represent Great Britain at the 57th Venice Biennale. As the contemporary is once again distilled in this most renowned event, the organisers have defined a shift in focus from the exhibition that has been shuttered a dozen weeks earlier:

"In the wake of the Biennale Arts directed by Okwui Enwezor, centered on the theme of the rifts and divisions that pervade the world, and aware that we are currently living in an age of anxiety, La Biennale has selected Christine Macel as a curator committed to emphasizing the important role artists play in inventing their own universes and injecting generous vitality into the world that we live in." (La Biennale, 2016)

It's difficult to quell the cynical feeling that this realignment ushers the way for a brighter and more commercial offering at the next iteration of the festival. That a possible reassertion of an autonomous artist championed by Greenberg, working at a remove, concocting their own visions away from the difficulties of society-at-large, may dull the criticality of the past festival. The blurb feels reactionary.

Although one can only speculate, this initial hint of festival's direction would suggest an interest in the 'material turn' bubbling forth from all quarters. The 2016 edition of Glasgow International also proposed materiality as a theme, and artists looked to the industrial past of the city for inspiration, particularly notable in the work of Clare Barclay who used cut fabric that appeared to be in various stages of production combined with an olfactory punch of liquid tar (Figure 95) Sheila Hicks' technicolor lumps and spoolings of fibre cascaded down in the cavernous space of Tramway, and Cosima von Bonin's appliqued panels and soft fabric zoomorphic sculptures occupied Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art. While in the much smaller venue of Koppe Astner, artist Leila Hekmat set a stage cloaked in costumes the colour of flesh and intestines, and mounted *The French Mistake*, an opera filled with tales of love, lust and bodies, while the actors robed and disrobed, pulling down the garments and letting them drop to the floor. (Glasgow International Festival, 2016)

The simultaneous festival Arts Sheffield, also combined the material with the political, taking as a starting point "the political, social, cultural and material histories of the city of Sheffield" (Art Sheffield, 2016). Less focused on the luxurious, communal and unfixed communications of cloth,

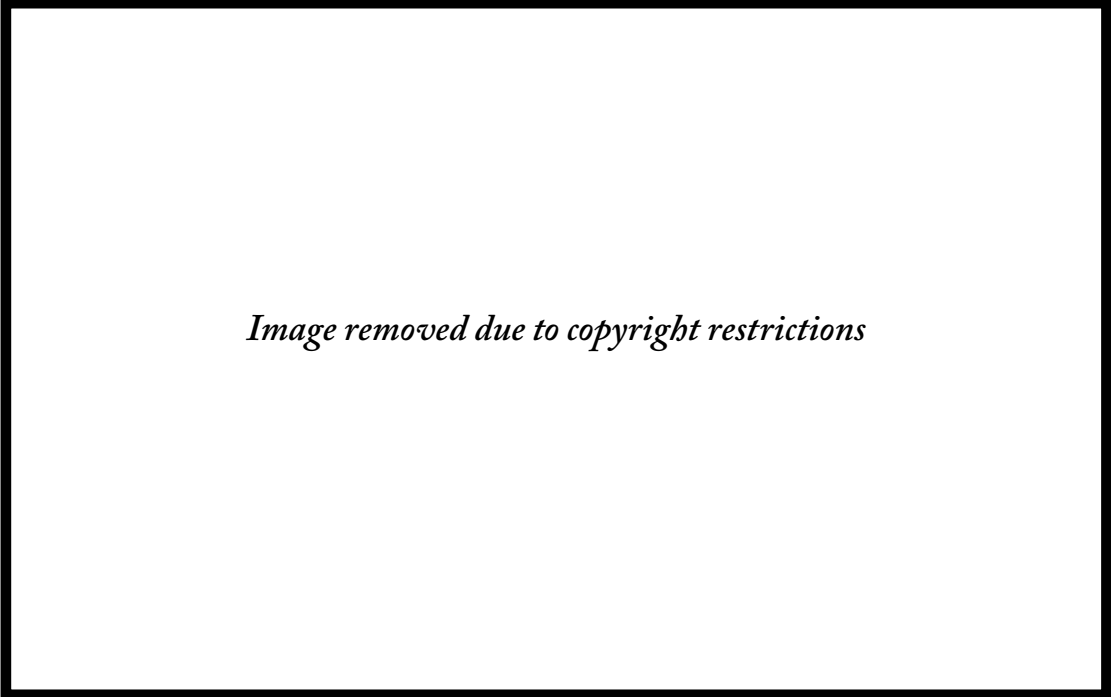


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*Figure 95: Claire Barclay, **Bright Bodies**, 2016, Installation View, Glasgow International*

these works were informed by the democratised technologies of the 1970s and 80s and comprised entirely of video, film and sound works. Despite the differences in the kinds of work in circulation, both festivals identify specificity within media. They encourage a reading of the materials as one that ties them to a particular geography, local histories and an idiosyncratic lexicon.

The dialectic created by the shift from the global to the individualistic as outlined by Venice is collapsed in the models of Glasgow and Sheffield to express something more direct and less stark: artists invent their own worlds using the materials of our shared one. These materials can act as potent signifiers of our political and social realities and identities even while the artists employ them in strange and unexpected manners.

The specific curatorial thrust of 2017's Venice Biennale is still forming, however at least within the work of Phyllida Barlow, it is likely that this model of materiality will be explored. Barlow creates immersive and overwhelming spaces that feel at once familiar and alienating, made from the most banal and overlooked materials, but painted, twisted and trussed up into shapes that communicate visceral psychological states (Figure 96). Barlow understands the potential bathos lurking in a slumped form. Her objects are unfixed, falling, and profoundly unstable; a state she frequently achieves, like many other sculptors over the last century, through her manipulations and configurations of cloth and rope.

Part 2 – Contribution to New Knowledge

Duchamp is understood to have changed the course of twentieth century art through the ready-made. As John Roberts notes in *The Intangibilities of Form*, “Duchamp’s importance lies in his separation of artist work from conventional signs of artistic authorship” (2007:p.80). However, this project argues that Duchamp has a twin legacy; *3 Standard Stoppages* also marked the opening up of sculptural practices to the shaping influence of chance and gravity, often most immediately and directly communicated through the use of textiles. The dropped pieces of string in *3 Standard Stoppages* created a lineage of cloth-based works that lies inbetween the skilled hand and the final form. Works that are characterised by their willing embrace of an unpredictable material agency through the harnessing of multiple possibilities and infinite arrangements. A century later, cloth and string continue to best encapsulate that unstable state – that moment between the hand’s last contact and the material’s own configuration in space. These fibres that we create and depend upon for every aspect of our lives cast down, thrown out, looped over, hitched across. As Robert Morris has explained, “it was Duchamp [...] who was a freeing influence for me to be able to explore the different ways of letting the process come in.” (quoted in Weiss 2013:p.25).

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, the use of cloth in a sculptural context can act as a material disruptor within the context of physical space and sculptural time through small and subtle means. Its fundamentally unstable nature questions the structural autonomy of the sculptural




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Figure 96: Phyllida Barlow, untitled: 11 awnings, 2013

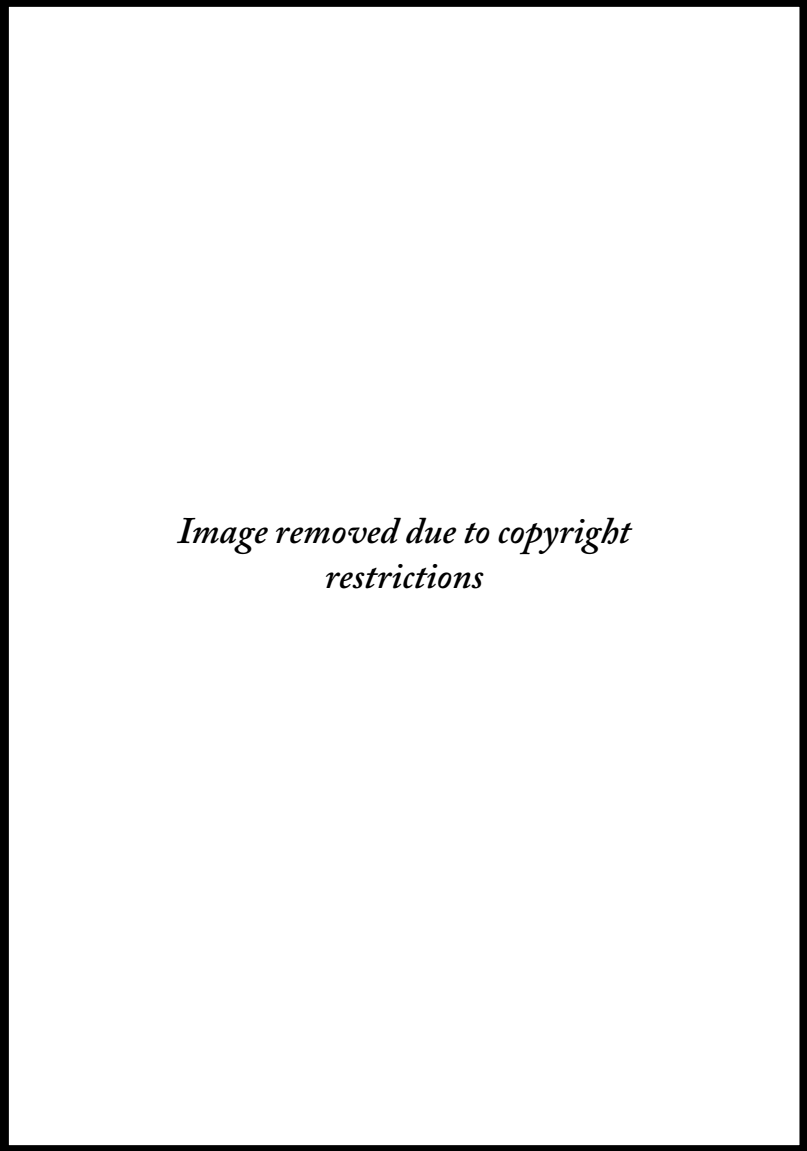
object itself, the static nature of architecture and the temporal relationship between the audience or viewer and the cloth-based work. These instances were presented through the introduction of three archetypal figures, Penelope, Fontaine and the Rag Picker to exemplify how the soft mechanisms explored by artists have been embodied in other cultural figures who have used cloth to create spaces of autonomy and resistance. I hope that this text continues to deny that cloth is an inadequate vehicle of meaning and thought; that even unadorned and without embellishment, its very physicality can rupture space, unsettle form, and blur a fixed experience of time.

However, as this research has also demonstrated, this lineage is under-articulated and there is a persistent and off-hand silence around the use of textiles in sculptural practices. This is particularly true of works that function within the fine art mainstream and when the artists are men. By examining the existing narratives of textiles in sculptural practices, primarily available in exhibition catalogues, this project has identified their narrow and partial accounts. Exhibitions by and large acknowledge a singular genesis of textile-based work and therefore deny the numerous histories embodied by cloth. This text instead urges that when fabric is discussed in a fine art context, that there is an acknowledgement that textiles offer specific material and cultural resonances and properties that artists of both genders, and in many historical and geographic contexts have exploited over the past century. This project picks up these silent, dropped threads to contextualise them within the wider discourses of the period without denying their materiality.

This undertaking has meant that I now understand the critical and historical lineage behind my actions every time I drop a piece of thread, every time I insist that my work is shown thrown on the ground. And every time I contrast that disregard with the careful construction of the piece itself. My own practice often works between the tensions of building something up, bit by bit, and then throwing it to the floor, allowing gravity to shape the pieces, working with a camera to document one configuration after another. In this manner, it is informed by the multiple ways cloth has been used by artists over the past century and develops from an engagement with the legacy of the *Abakans* as much as the legacy of *3 Standard Stoppages*.

Conducting this research has facilitated the identification of these combined histories in which I can situate my practice. It has taken inklings and niggles, anxieties and doubts and enabled a thorough exploration of this ignored or dismissed terrain. It has alleviated the shame I have felt for persisting in this material investigation. For always insisting on cloth.

This has resulted in a refinement of my practice. A greater confidence in being able to communicate with a singular gesture, rather than feeling a duty to tackle the entire difficult history within my practice. My writing can articulate the history. My work can continue to explore the multivalent meanings embedded in the structure and movements of cloth, one piece at a time.



*Image removed due to copyright
restrictions*

*Figure 97: Sheila Hicks, **Mighty Mathilde and her Consort**, 2016*

Part 3 – Next Steps

In the final months of this project, an image of a fraying piece of cloth has started to stand in as a visual representation for this entire PhD submission. While this is not the grandest of conjurings, it betrays a certain confidence in its suggestion of a singular entirety, a sense that the disparate works, themes, and processes have found their way into one woven piece.

This cloth representation of the project also marks out its limitations, or my own version of a clothline paradox. If the shoreline paradox proposes that given a small enough unit of measurement, the coast of any piece of land could be of infinite lengths, then my own piece of metaphoric cloth, explored in close enough detail, could also be endlessly long. This project has marked out a territory of a material impulse as it worked its way through the decades, and simultaneously, crystallised my final studio work into a small vocabulary of gestures.

Once beyond the necessary confines of this project, I anticipate shifting these units of measurement to consider smaller instances of textile usage in sculptural work, and broader, looser gestures in my own practice. Specifically, I would like to further consider the multiple timescales embedded in cloth-based works and how the potentialities of their movements affect the viewers' encounter with the objects. I have also become interested in the trope of the cloth bundle, seen in recent works of Sheila Hicks (Figure 97) and Kimsooja amongst others, and the implications of the interiority of those pieces.

In my practice, I anticipate continuing to develop ways of working with photography, and particularly with video, to suggest abstracted and unstable environments. Feeling like I've just hit upon the methods of making my knotted block pieces, there is further scope for developing those objects. Intrigued by the voids and the irregular edges of the shapes, I would like to make pieces that exaggerate these spaces; pushing the potential for movement and displacement in the forms.

Jill Stoner uses the term 'thready multiplicities' to discuss the proliferation of her minor architectures (2012:p.15) and I feel that this acts as a very literal description of any text contributing to the written history of textiles. As the editors who have started to pull together the texts of emergent textile theory have demonstrated, cloth is so profoundly rooted in every aspect of our lives and culture that singular narratives are futile at best and damaging at worst. This is a single strand, but one that I hope might be useful for other practitioners who use cloth and feel dissatisfied with the scant narratives ascribed to the material.

"Cloth ends everything." I often think of Anatsui's statement with sadness. Because as much as I understand the impetus for his remark, I also know it to be untrue. Holding a length of string in

our hands, a fragment of cloth, is not the end, but fibrous potentiality; an unknown future, a tool, and a potent substance for understanding ourselves. A meter stick, a typewriter all wrapped up in cloth, a pendulum about to swing, trousers dropped, our dress cut. Ever referencing the familiar, ever about to shift and change and slip away from us.



*Figures 98 and 99: the damaged cover of *Thinking Through Craft**

On The Last Day

I gave myself an unofficial long weekend to complete the white piece, but decided on Saturday to push through until it was over. There were hundreds of knots left to complete and I worked solidly for seven hours, cutting the last lengths of yarn, and then one by one, pulling them through the hideous plastic mesh.

At some stage the muscles in my right arm start to tighten, and I get a tingling sensation when I reach out to grab another strand. I know these are the early signs of RSI, and if I worked like this every day, that would be a concern. My back is seized up and my neck is sore. My body mirrors the first day of work, that day of over-exertion and excitement where I couldn't stop because I just wanted to see a development.

I wrap the wool around a copy of Thinking Through Craft, initially selected just due to size and proximity, but now a satisfying choice. I've damaged it by pulling thousands of strands around it, and slicing through them. The cover is scratched from the scissors blades and the pages are creased from the pressure.

A friend had told me that one day the work would just end. And today this work did just end. She had been talking about the dissertation, not the studio work, but I still have to take that on faith. In this final moment, I'm left with two partially used balls of white wool – I had to start a new one before the other one was finished because the exterior wool is straighter and looks better around the edges of the form. At the end I was just doing the edges. And I have an assortment of my wire tools, some still functional, some relegated due to split and snagging wires.

The prospect of unoccupied afternoons is curious to consider. The dissertation will still occupy the lucid mornings, so what work will fill the end of the days? Without meaning to, I started the first black form at the same time as the dissertation, or at least the version of the dissertation that will make up the final document; the first of the last drafts. And now the morning work feels off-balance, missing the quiet, repetitive ballast of the afternoon's knots.

It's not that I find myself at a loss for tasks; that list still feels relentlessly long. There are photographs to take, lay-outs to mock-up and finalise, books to bind. But I know that this work will have a rhythm more akin to writing; fits and starts and flashes of wild productivity and the sludgy, guilt-inducing periods of inactivity or paralysis. The stretches of time dedicated to making the black one and the white one were predictable and unwavering; I never got much faster, there was no way to vary the speed. I could only sit there, pulling and knotting, until it was over.

For the moment, I still don't know what the black one and the white one are, or what they fully mean, but nevertheless, I feel that they are still behaving the way they should, the way I meant them to. There are many things they resist. They won't be hung on a wall; their weight would break the plastic canvas and



Figure 100: Breeze Block I and II, on the floor

they would fall away. A plinth would do little for them. Viewers need to be as high above them as possible to see their pattern resolve and fade away. The work to make them is finite, and over, and now there is the rest of my life that can be taken up with understanding what they mean and how they mean, with moving them back from the realm outside of language, into a verbalised articulation. The shift from the making to the phenomenological encounter, an experience that will happen every time I enter the studio and see them on the floor.

Appendix A

EXHIBITIONS

- 2016 Confined Projections, International Festival of Projections, Canterbury
- 2015 If I could sink my teeth into the whole earth, XL Gallery, Newcastle University, Newcastle
Associate Members Show (Selected by Adam Chodzko), LIMBO, Margate
- 2014 Questions To Ask Yourself Before Building Your First House, Edinburgh Sculpture
Workshops, Edinburgh
Transfixture, Project Room, Glasgow
Presencing Place, Whistle Art Stop, Haltwhistle

CONFERENCE PAPERS AND RESEARCH TALKS

Fallen, Draped and Torn: The Unstable History of Cloth in 20th-Century Sculpture, AAH New Voices
2015: Image Matter: Art and Materiality, Manchester Metropolitan University, November 2015

A practice-led investigation into the use of textiles to describe the unstable in contemporary sculpture and installation practices (poster), Mind the Gap! National Workshop on Practice-led Research, NCAD, Dublin, April 2015

The Thread and The Tear: untangling the unique textile histories of art and craft practices at the site of production, (poster and presentation) Material Culture in Action Conference, Glasgow University, September 2015

Anxiety as Research Methodology or Why Marcel Duchamp was the First Textile Artist, Northumbria Post Graduate Research Conference, Northumbria University, Newcastle, March 2015

A Retrospective Specificity: Identifying a Lexicon for Textiles, New Work in Modernist Studies Conference, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff, December 2014

Thready Multiplicities: Pulling Apart the Fabric of the City, Northumbria Post-Graduate Research Conference, Northumbria University, Newcastle, April 2014

ARTIST TALKS

The Cass, London Metropolitan University, February 2015, London
Museum of London, January 2015, London

PUBLICATIONS

McGown, K. *Exhibition Review: Art_Textiles* at The Whitworth. Journal of Art Writing by Students, June 2016.

CONFERENCES ATTENDED

Subversive Stitch Revisited, V&A, November 2013

From Owen Jones to Marianne Straub: 150 years of the Warner Archive, V&A, September 2014

Imagine Cities, Folkestone Triennial, October 2014

The Sculpture Question, Folkestone Triennial, November 2014

TRAINING ATTENDED

Practising Research, Fine Art Research Training Programme, Northumbria University, 15 October 2013

Literature Review Training, Northumbria University Library, 12 November 2013

Endnote Training, Northumbria University Library, 12 November 2013

Art Research Methodologies I and II, University of Sunderland, 13 November and 4 December 2013

New Researcher Training Session, British Library, 2 December 2013

Being a University Lecturer, Northumbria University, 3 December 2013

Developing and Running a Research Event, Northumbria University, 9 December 2013

Research Philosophies and Paradigms, Northumbria University, 18 and 25 March 2014

Presenting Research, Northumbria University, 19 March 2014

Understanding the Research Field, Northumbria University, 29 January 2014

Qualitative Research Training Course Newcastle University, 11 and 12 June 2014

Teacher Training, Northumbria University, 29 June – 1 July 2015

Preparing for your Viva, Northumbria University, 19 July 2016

Appendix B

*A Handbook For
Curators Who Are
Interested
In Using Cloth
In Their Exhibitions*

Katie McGown

Textiles are having a moment right now.

You can get in on that, if you haven't already. Think about what textiles could do for your space. Do you know who uses textiles?

Of course you do. I don't even have to say it.

You know exactly the kind of people who are always using textiles. Finding ways of working them into their art. Bright and brash and endlessly worked over.

And, let's be honest, you probably should be showing more of those kinds of people.

I want to slap you for the cynical, dilettante motivations you've just demonstrated.

It's not helpful, though, is it? That's not an encouraging position for me to take. Because I genuinely do want you to show cloth. I think it's a fantastic idea. I just don't want you to fall into the normal traps.

Let me recant. I won't slap you.

I want to coax you through this plush minefield.

Your body is covered in this very substance right now, right now as you read this. You can't get away from it. Your visitors will be covered with it too, layers and layers, walking around, swathed in the material. Sometimes so much that they can't even move properly; their flesh wrapped and pinched. They're too hot and they should have left some layers in the cloakroom.

Imagine it was marble or mild steel. Bodies sheathed in smooth shells of crystalline shards, or warm, oiled, louvered and welded panels. Our muscles sharper under these pressing, rigid, sheets. Imagine crowds with such an intimate knowledge of those materials. White plaster pouring into, onto them, first cold then warm as it sets then hot and hard and breaking as their muscles move. Imagine if those materials surrounded every one of our memories.

How many pieces of cloth

is your body touching right now?

When was the last time your gallery used the word *textile* in a press release?

What about *cloth*?

What about *fibre*?

Just kidding. That last one was a joke.

But it's probably been a few years. Is that true?

It's so useful that we can keep fabric in this uncomfortable limbo space, always showing it, yet not talking about it, so that when we DO say loudly and directly that we're going to show textiles, it can feel transgressive and novel. But we just loudly show it once. About once every fifteen years. That way the audiences don't cotton on. And we can marginalise practices that start to feel a bit, what, folksy? A bit too concerned with a lived experience that is no longer the lived experience we want to think about.

Some of this text will be useful and some of it will feel wrong.

Some of this text you will know already and some of it will cause you mild repulsion.

There are practical considerations with displaying textiles. It moves, and may not fall and drape in the exact way you wish. Robert Morris knew this and he stopped making *Felt Pieces* for the floor. Instead they became wall-mounted so the fixtures holding the felt could be precise and the folds would dutifully fall and slump exactly the way they had before in the pictures. And the curators weren't frustrated. And everyone got what they expected.

People will want to touch it. You are going to have to be so vigilante or else my hand might just reach out. Soft crushes and tiny raised stitches. And I want to smell them too, and hear the sounds they make rubbing between my fingers, brushed up against my cheek. I want to do everything but taste them. The thought of cloth between my teeth, squeaking and mashing right at the back, right between my molars, is a visceral nightmare.

And some are delicate, and some will dissolve in the light, and the air.

But adjust the light levels, monitor the humidity, and get one with it. It will likely outlive your body and mine.

Please avoid the following exhibition clichés:

1) Solo shows of young, white men who have just discovered a way to wield a needle or the meaning of the word “weft”.

These individuals are fascinated with their newly discovered skill. The associations they have with the process, the materials, the final product come thick and fast: stitches are pixels, they are building up a surface like a canvas, this is how all of their clothing is made and all of the fashion and they had never even considered it before, not until right now!

Do not give them a solo show. Do not present their work as being either innovative or historically significant within the history of fibre, our longest lineage of technology and tool-making. Do not do this unless their work is properly contextualised. Unless it alludes the the millennia of skill and technique that they sit upon, squat and fat, batting around the tassels of the intricate behemoth of humanity’s textile production. Do not do this unless you plan to give an even bigger, even better show to the marginalised individuals, women, people of colour, non-Western artists, not-straight artists, who have picked up thread decades and generations before.

2) Do not show the works of celebrated men dabbling with cloth alongside historical and anonymous pieces probably created by women.

This is not an acceptable compromise to cliché number 1.

A lot of your favourite man artists have used cloth at least once or twice, so there is a lot to choose from. I'm not even talking about painting. That's obvious.

The man artists have used felt and latex and afghans and cushions and linen and lace and plush and rope and string and sometimes they are overt about it, and sometimes they're cagey.

But sidling this work up alongside quilts, or artefacts, or samplers, is almost never a good idea. It reinforces an idea that craft and its output is fungible. That one quilt is largely equivalent to another. That the circumstances of their production were the same. That the people making them were thinking similar thoughts.

3) Shows that attempt to capture the vast potentiality of the material within a single exhibition

You cannot be too specific. You cannot. You cannot ever, ever be too specific.

Think of the smallest gesture or meaning implicit in cloth. Think of the most elusive colour. Think of the scent of the hallway carpets in your piano teacher's home. Your favourite anti-neoliberal tract, your preferred industrial aesthetic.

You can take the most microscopic impulse, the broadest philosophical argument and build a show of cloth-based work around it.

Artists have been using cloth actively and regularly in their work for over fifty years. That's a fairly conservative estimate. They've made an awful lot of objects. They're still making a lot of them. Maybe more now than ever before. You can find ones that investigate precisely what you want to investigate.

A good test is to read through the description of your exhibition and replace the word 'Textile' with 'Paint' or 'Stone' and if it sounds facile and reductive, you should get more specific.

4) Shows that present textiles and their display as a new frontier

It's been done before. I promise you. Whatever you were planning to do, someone has probably done it. Or at least an iteration that you should consider carefully when plotting your own exhibition. Textile exhibition have been around for decades and yet they are still presented as being cutting edge. When you insist on ignoring history for the sake of your press release, you deny the very real and central role cloth has played in twentieth century work.

And a final note for all Curators who are not interested in using Cloth in their Exhibitions:

You are lying to yourselves. You've likely featured work that has exploited some material or cultural property of cloth in your recent programme. And again, I'm not even talking about canvases. It's just that you didn't talk about "cloth" and you certainly didn't say "textile", you maybe referred to the particular material (felt, spandex, silk). You maybe talked about the attributes that this work embodied: slipping, falling, piling, swooping, tearing, shredding. And these tactics probably made you feel safe. Like you were putting large, pillowy barriers between the soft and real art in your space and the unkempt crochets you imagine being hooked out there, in the domestic wildernesses.

You probably don't imagine the hooks, or the frames or the needles of course. No need to know how these things get constructed. You just imagine their encroaching masses, the women sitting and spinning out these yardages that you don't understand and certainly don't want to touch. They need to be firmly told just how much they bore you. Just how much you don't care about them, their work, or the circumstances of their life.

There is no reason why you should listen to me. I am not a curator.

But.

When you first see a cloth-based work, before you even hold it in your hand, your gloved hand, I ask you to make no assumptions. To not imagine that you know immediately know the territory of the artist. Just hold off. Just think longer. Just look closer.

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